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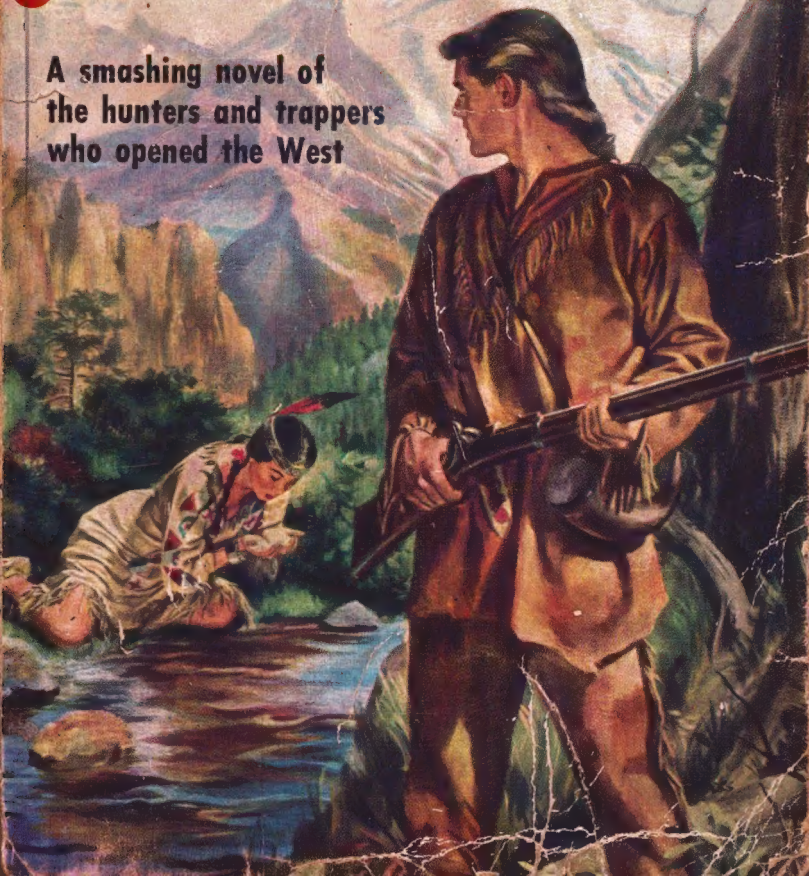
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# MOUNTAINS

by DALE VAN EVERY



## THE SHINING MOUNTAINS

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DALE VAN EVERY



## CHAPTER I

MATT climbed to the treetop and stretched out on the familiar limb. Below him, a mile distant, little Wood River joined the ice-littered sweep of the Mississippi, and there lay the squat, hewn-log winter quarters where the two young captains waited impatiently for the release of spring to set them at last upon their tremendous journey. And Matt had only to lift his eyes to see, across the Mississippi, the wide gap in the western forest through which poured the Missouri, at the end of its long course that reached westward and northward and westward again beyond the knowledge of man.

His gaze lifted higher to the pale wintry sky above the western forest, and slowly he closed his eyes. As always, a vision sprang into view, as distinct and definite as any painted picture, though far more real and glowing than any painted picture he had ever seen. He could see in the distance the blue-white, sky-piercing peaks of the Shining Mountains, as people called that fabled range which, report had it, loomed above the far headwaters of the Missouri. Among mountains Matt knew only the rolling, shaggy-shouldered Alleghenies, hardly more than overgrown hills. But in one of the schoolmaster's books there had been a faded etching of the snow-clad Alps, and it was upon this image his imagination drew. For him the Shining Mountains, which no living white man had ever seen, soared to luminous heights, crowned by gleaming spires of ice that captured and threw back the very color of the sky. And they rose above shadowy, blue, cloud-wreathed gorges that led inward and onward to hidden valleys of infinite promise and mystery. The atmosphere bathing those distant mountains and filling the space through which Matt was looking had the brilliant, swimming sheen of the purest lake except that it



was also more transparent than air, so that there was at once the impression of an immense distance and a welcoming invitation to venture across the distance.

This vision had come upon him in the schoolmaster's woodlot that evening. Eph Jackson, riding past, mentioned the first rumor that Lewis and Clark were looking for volunteers, and from it had sprung the sudden, elated impulse to break away from the schoolmaster's service and to keep on and on until he was surfeited, if that were possible, by movement and freedom and acquaintance with new lands far beyond the little Kentucky valley which until then had marked the limits of his experience.

Matt opened his eyes and looked again at the expedition's winter camp. Suddenly he realized with a thrill of relief that he could allow his mind to turn back to that summer day he had presented himself to William Clark without bracing himself against the immediate flush of shamed dismay that had, until this moment, invariably accompanied the memory. He could even remember, without new pain, the sound of the very words.

"We are looking for men," Clark had said. "But we have use only for soldiers, boatmen, and hunters. How does that fit your case?"

Matt had had to admit miserably that it did not fit his case at all. The years the average young man of the frontier had been free to rove and hunt he, an orphan, had been bound out to the schoolmaster, his days devoted to plow and scythe rather than rifle and canoe, his nights lighted by a student's candle instead of a campfire.

Now, however, there was less need to admit so sad a weakness and now he could recall what had happened next with a glow of actual satisfaction. William Clark stepped back into the cabin and Matt, turning away, discovered that the old man dozing in his tilted chair under the oak was now regarding him, his eyes open and bright and twinkling.

"What you running away from, boy?"

"I'm not running away from anything," Matt snapped. Then he realized the old man must be William's brother, General George Rogers Clark, the great Western hero, and he tried to frame a more respectful reply. But there was no way to account for his vision of the Shining Mountains. He could hardly account for that to himself. "I just want to see the country."

The General nodded, appearing to comprehend this perfectly. He began rubbing his chin thoughtfully while his quizzical regard ran over Matt's figure, from his glossy coonskin cap to his beaded moccasins, powder horn, knife, tomahawk, and finally to the rifle with the traces of grease still in the rifling around the muzzle, noting that all these items looked as new and unused as if Matt had just stepped from some outfitting store in Louisville, which in fact he had.

"Did I want to go along that much I'd figure it this way: Billy and young Lewis, they're too late to get much of a start this year. They'll have to go into winter quarters somewhere around St. Louis. The kind of men they've picked—they're not the kind that take easy to setting around. Fore the winter's over some of them will get hurt fighting and some of them will wander off. And when spring comes there'll be another man or two who'll change his mind and decide he doesn't want to go after all. What I mean is—I'd figure that if I showed up in their camp next spring able to prove I was any sort of a woodsman, I'd count on a chance to be taken on the last minute."

Matt listened, shivering with sudden new excitement. The General leaned over, picked up Matt's rifle, examined it briefly, reached for Matt's powder horn, shook out a dusting of powder in the pan, and pulled the trigger, expertly lighting his pipe from the brief flash. "No way to learn how to handle yourself in the woods like going it alone for a while. There's some wild enough country between here and the Mississippi. And a few Indians mean enough to trail you for that fine new rifle. If you live through the winter,

come spring you can count yourself the makings of a backwoodsman."

Matt stammered his gratitude, his heart swelling with new dedication, looked up and around to orient himself by the sun, and set off in a beeline for the northwest, climbing the first rail fence and keeping on across the field to the edge of the forest. And at the Mississippi edge of that forest in December he had witnessed from a distance the explorers going into winter quarters, as the General had forecast, before quite reaching the mouth of the Missouri.

An occasional survey from the treetop lookout was the closest approach to the encampment Matt had so far permitted himself. Yet the temptation to return for even this distant glimpse was with him always. To deal with this weakness he had devised a kind of game. Whenever in the course of his inexperienced grappling with those problems of woodcraft which infested his solitary wintering he had achieved some distinct success, however minor, he permitted himself as a reward a brief return here to dwell once again on the view of the camp and the Missouri gateway.

His wintering so far had not proved the task he had expected. His intelligence had been developed by education. Unlike the average primitive man, white or red, accustomed to living off the wilderness, he was capable of forethought. Long before the first snow his range across the woods and marshes and prairies of the Illinois was dotted with hidden stores of dry wood, caches of walnuts, pecans, and dried meat and berries. As the winter wore on he had come with comparative comfort through the season when animals and savages knew cold and hunger.

Matt found these reflections pleasant as he lay stretched out on the branch watching the camp's early morning activities. By spring he would have well earned his chance to become a part of these activities. He had been sent to the wilderness to earn his spurs. Alone and unaided he would have won them by the harsh test of survival. He would have proved himself fit to be one of that select company.

Still glowing with these pleasant considerations, he eased himself off the branch, slid down the tree, dropped to the ground, and reached for his rifle, which he had left leaning against the trunk.

It was gone.

There was only the imprint of the stock on the soft ground and, a yard away, the well-defined moccasin track where an Indian had stepped from the concealment of the adjacent redberry bush to snatch the gun while its owner dreamed in the treetop above.

Matt sank to his knees, staring incredulously at the two indentations in the soil. For a second he was too stunned to think and then the next second a full comprehension literally exploded in his mind, as when a lightning flash reveals every detail of a dark landscape. This comprehension centered upon a scene more real than the marks of the gun butt and the moccasin. He could see the stern face of young William Clark and hear his own voice reporting: "I followed your brother's suggestion. I wintered alone in the Illinois Country. I intended to prove to you I was an experienced woodsman. The only trouble was—an Indian sneaked up and stole my rifle."

The harsh cry of rage was not a part of the imagined scene. It came from his own lips at the moment. He sprang to his feet and glared around. There was nothing to see but the dark trunks of trees, leafless thickets, wisps of mist rising from the brown earth littered with patches of snow left by the midwinter thaw. The Indian had merged indistinguishably into the mottled pattern of the wilderness.

Matt ran to the top of a near-by knoll, peered about in vain, and rushed on to the crest of the next hill. There was still nothing to see but the forest, nothing to hear but his own labored breathing. He plunged on in ever-widening circles, crashing through thickets, sprawling over fallen trees, wallowing through bogs. At length he came out on another hilltop. Here he saw in the shallow valley below an elk gingerly crossing the rotting ice of Wood River. Just as

he was glancing away the elk lifted his head, sniffed the air, and whirled back into the forest from which he had emerged.

Matt bounded down the hillside. Something unusual had disturbed the animal. It might have been the skulking Indian. Coming out on the stream bank, Matt stumbled upon his own campsite of the night before. He realized with disgust that the elk had been alarmed not by the sudden scent of the Indian but by that of the dead campfire.

He stood there panting, motionless for the moment only because he had no idea which way to turn. He looked at the nest of leaves from which he had risen so confidently at dawn, at first idly, and then with a sudden stir of excitement, as he began to realize that for the first time since he had dropped out of the tree he was looking not at what he hoped to see but at what was really there, not only at what his mind was prepared to detect but at each actual existing detail. He saw where he had slept with the rifle cradled in his arms and the loosened tomahawk in his hand. He saw the traces of every movement he had made as he awoke, rekindled the fire, broiled the trout, and quenched the fire again. Noting this record so easily read, he felt more the fool than when he had first discovered the loss of the rifle.

He set out at a steady trot back to the lookout tree, alert now, thinking, planning ahead, husbanding his strength. Once more at the tree, he took a long breath, controlled his impatience, and crouched to examine the ground behind the redberry bush until he discovered which way the Indian had slid away. At first the trail was ridiculously easy to follow, for the Indian had crawled, digging in his elbows. But once he had gained distance enough to feel safe in rising to his feet, he had taken expert care to leave no trace, so that Matt had to scrutinize literally every inch of ground, every fallen leaf, every stick, every tuft of moss. Under the pressure of this emergency he was learning how little he had learned. He was learning that the least detail often had the most meaning, the bent twig a significance more revealing than the fallen oak.



At last he found where the Indian, incautiously running along a fallen tree trunk, had dislodged a strip of rotting bark. Here Matt stopped to think. It had taken him an hour to follow this far—a distance the Indian might well have made without pause. He could hardly consider himself pressing a pursuit when his quarry was gaining on him every minute. He must prove more resourceful.

Ahead was the northern slope of a hill where many old drifts of snow had remained unmelted. Naturally the Indian would avoid the snow areas, where he was certain to leave obvious tracks. Matt scanned the hillside until he determined the one devious route by which the Indian could have avoided all the patches of snow. He ran to the point this possible route crossed the crest and to his supreme satisfaction discovered that his reasoning had been correct.

Here, however, a new puzzle was presented. From here on the Indian made no pretense of disguising his trail, which angled off suddenly to the north as if he were heading directly for the Kickapoo village on the Sangamon. For the moment Matt was delighted, but after a few strides he pulled up to think again. This was too easy. He began to speculate on the Indian's most probable reasoning. Initially, the savage had taken the greatest care to conceal his trail. That was to give him the freedom of action of a head start. Now he had left a well-marked trail going north. That must have been intended to lead the pursuit away from his eventual destination, which could only be, therefore, in the opposite direction.

Matt remembered a well-beaten north-south game trail following an old buffalo trace in the second creek bottom to the east. He cut straight across through the woods to this trail. Here his confidence in himself was somewhat restored. For here it was plainly indicated that the Indian, no longer worrying about pursuit, had trotted southward, taking no thought to where he placed his feet, his mind already pre-occupied, no doubt, with anticipating the pleasure of exhibiting his booty to his people.

The thought of the Indian's self-satisfaction made Matt grunt with displeasure. His rage, formerly directed entirely against his own stupidity, now began to center on the man ahead. Grimly he lengthened his stride, making sure that two of his matched three of the Indian's.

But by midafternoon he began to sense a new threat. The first chill flicker of a northwest wind touched his cheek. He had learned during his months in the wilderness to note the weather with an acute perception possible only to the man denied the easy, sense-blunting refuge of habitual shelter. The thaw was ended. Before many hours it would snow. He began to run. Darkness might interrupt his pursuit until morning. But snow might cover the Indian's tracks until spring.

Night and the first snow fell together. He slowed to a full stop, sweating and gasping. Defeat peered at him out of the pale shadows. Already the ground was whitening, all existing signs and tracks were becoming indistinguishable. But, shaking his head wearily, he still refused to accept defeat.

Again he tried to put himself in the place of the Indian. For hours the Indian had trotted down the southward course of the old buffalo trace. His gait had not been that of an anxious flight but that of a steady journey toward a fixed destination. He had followed the trail as one follows a highway leading homeward. Matt knew the trace extended to the broad strip of prairie along the Mississippi below Cahokia, more recently known as the American Bottom, where once the buffalo had migrated in summer to wallow and gorge in the six-foot grass. Though there were no Indian towns in the area, during the autumn hunting season, Matt had often noted from a safe distance the passing of small wandering bands of Shawnee and Delaware, homeless since General Wayne had broken the power of their once great nations. Any one of these family groups might have chosen to winter somewhere in the thick strip of forest between the bottom and the Mississippi, a location made attractive by the conjunction of fuel, concealment, catfish, and

the occasional opportunity for judicious thieving at the expense of stormbound river boats. Matt decided to gamble on this chance. He planned to rest for the night on the crest of the eastern bluff above the bottom. Then, with luck, from this vantage point he might in the morning, if the storm lifted, catch some glimpse of smoke from a cooking fire.

His luck proved much better than this. When toward midnight he came out on the edge of the bluff, he saw against the low-hanging clouds reflected glare of a huge fire in the direction of the river. Excitement overcoming his weariness, he scrambled down the cliff and plowed across the snow-covered prairie toward the dark belt of forest that bordered the Mississippi. The first great glare had faded by the time he entered the woods, but he had no difficulty in keeping his direction, for long before he could see anything through the trees he was guided by the din of yells and laughter. When at last he peered through the surrounding thicket at the Shawnee winter camp on the estuary of a small creek that entered the Mississippi, Matt comprehended the situation at a glance.

The band numbered six or eight men and perhaps twice as many women and children. All were as drunk as only Indians can become. Several of the men were bleeding from knife wounds inflicted upon one another during their reckless frolic, two of the women were scratching and pulling hair, even the children were fighting, maudlin or stupefied. The glare in the sky had been caused by the accidental or heedless burning of one of the log-and-brush huts composing the encampment. Far from being sobered by the disaster, the merrymakers had evidently greeted it as a welcome addition to the entertainment, and most of the celebrants were engaged in attempting to catch a companion unawares so that he might be pushed into the coals.

The source of the whisky was a barrel that had formed part of the cargo of a bateau beached on the bank of the estuary. By the scattered furniture and household goods, some of which the Indians were from time to time wantonly

throwing on the fire, it was evident that the bateau belonged to a party of white immigrants, though the only whites Matt could see were two French boatmen cowering in panic against the wall of the log hut that was the principal remaining edifice in the camp.

The snow was turning to sleet, adding a demoniac glitter to the figures of the Indians gamboling in the glare from the flames. For a moment Matt stared, fascinated. Then he caught sight of his rifle and thereafter felt interest in nothing aside from the recovery of it.

The gun lay across the lap of a loutish youth, the one sober redskin present, who occupied himself alternately with fondling and caressing the piece and with blackening his face and limbs with greased charcoal. The happy acquisition of a rifle seemed to have instilled in him the conviction that he was now a warrior.

Matt circled the camp and crept forward in the shadow of the beached bateau. From this angle he discovered, huddled on the ground beside the boat, two other members of the white party—both women. There was no indication of the white men of the family, who must either have been killed or have fled. The elder woman was lying on a mattress, wrapped in blankets, evidently ill. The younger was sitting at her head and was clasping something to her bosom that might be a child.

The discovery of the women filled Matt with angry dismay. Any attempt to recover his rifle might start an uproar that was certain to make the women's already grievous predicament more dangerous, possibly fatal. He was committed to considering their interests in addition to his own, which made his task infinitely more demanding. He edged cautiously toward them.

The woman on the mattress was murmuring in the delirium of fever. The other was dividing her attention between soothing the invalid and fussing with the baby under her shawl.

Matt presently caught a clearer view of the younger

woman's face. She could hardly be more than sixteen. Her regular features might have been beautiful in repose but now were too taut with emotion to suggest anything but a most unmaidenly resolution. The gray eyes under the dark brows were sparkling with tears. These were not, Matt noticed immediately, tears of weakness or fear but of anger, and the anger was directed not toward the drink-crazed Indians, to whose barbarous activities she was paying no heed whatever, but most strangely toward the infant in her arms. Matt edged closer. Under the shelter of her shawl she was offering her breast to the baby; it was the child's obstinate refusal to suckle that accounted for her anger.

"If you don't eat you'll die—and I won't let you die," the girl was berating the child under her breath.

When the baby still turned its face away she impatiently changed it end for end, tore her bodice wider, and exposed the other breast. Under the shadow of her shawl her lovely young bosom shone with a pale luminescence in the firelit glitter of the sleet. She began smearing the nipple with honey from a saucer and trying to force the infant to suck the honey from it. She was not the child's mother. She had no milk. She was merely resorting to this as a device to persuade the child to take nourishment.

Her concentration on what mattered most to her moved Matt to sudden decision. What mattered most to him was the recovery of his rifle. He need not delay for the sake of these people, for the sick woman and the baby, at any rate, might freeze if he waited cautiously for the Indians to become more helplessly drunken. He was fuming with angry impatience, and it was easy to persuade himself that the more sensible course was to take the Indians now by surprise rather than to wait for their chance discovery of his presence or for them to make some menacing move toward the women that would of itself force his hand.

Matt had a greater confidence in his physical capacities than his experience warranted. He knew himself to be unusually strong. At wrestling matches, feats of strength, and



bouts of fisticuffs associated so often with frontier clearing bees and house-raisings he had always been able to more than hold his own. He understood the advantage of making the first move in any physical contest and of making it a sudden and violent one.

Without more ado he ran swiftly into the midst of the frolic, bent over the budding warrior, snatched the rifle from him, gave him in exchange a hard kick in the groin, and sprang to the front of the cabin, where he set his back against the log wall.

The two French boatmen, cowering at his feet, looked up open-mouthed at this apparition which had so suddenly materialized out of the storm. The surprised Indians were slow to gather their drunken wits. Then the two nearest made belligerent staggering lunges toward the interloper. Matt met each with a drive of his rifle butt to the face. Both fell and crawled away, spitting, mumbling, mouthing their broken teeth.

Crane, the old chief of the band, was the first to get his senses in order. He peered about, blear-eyed, until he had located his musket on the ground, where it had been dropped after having been shot in the air during the earlier stages of the celebration, and began fumblingly to load it. Matt, however, was far quicker in charging his piece and was aiming it at Crane before the old chief had managed to get his shot pouch open. This threat further sharpened Crane's wits. He promptly dropped the musket and, eying Matt's rifle aimed steadily at his breastbone, with added discretion began urgently to signal to his companions to be calm.

In their general stupefaction all were willing enough except the young thief, who, furious in his despair, struggled painfully to his feet, lowered his head, and made a blind rush at Matt. Matt leaned his rifle against the wall, stepped aside, seized the foolhardy one by scalplock and breechclout, and threw him so violently that he rolled over and over into the edge of the fire. This feat of strength drew grunts of respectful awe from the rapidly sobering Indians.

Matt picked up his rifle and returned his watchful regard to Crane. Without looking down he kicked his moccasined foot sideways into the ribs of one of the squatting Frenchmen.

"Understand English?"

The boatman shook his head stupidly. Matt kicked the one on the other side.

"A little, *m'sieu*."

"Talk Shawnee?"

"*Oui, m'sieu*."

"Tell them I'm from the fort of the two captains."

Matt was delighted, and even a little proud, as if he himself had had something to do with achieving the prestige, to note the instant effect of this assertion on the Shawnee. The martial, disciplined resolution of the little force on Wood River had already made a profound impression on the observant Indians of the whole Illinois region.

"Tell them if they cause these people any more trouble we'll hang every last man of them to the highest tree between here and Mackinac."

The Shawnee began smiling and wagging their heads reassuringly. Crane came hurrying to him with outstretched hand. Matt waved him away.

"Tell him maybe I'll shake hands—tomorrow—if he's sober."

"Good—bruder," stammered Crane, crestfallen but deferential.

Matt stalked forward and kicked over the whisky barrel. The liquor, flowing out on the ground, brought a long sigh from Crane but no protest. Matt peered through the doorway of the unburned cabin at the dozen Indian men, women, and children stretched on the floor in drunken sleep. His voice rang with the arrogance of youth's first victory.

The Frenchmen, now that the tables were turned, began giving swaggering directions and the Indians able to walk hurried to obey. Matt was acutely aware of the girl coming toward him, the baby clasped in her arms, her face bright

with gratitude and admiration. He looked uneasily away and when he glanced toward her again she had returned to the bateau to superintend the moving of the sick woman.

Matt busied himself impatiently with building up the fire in the cabin. He was well able to estimate the risk he had run, the success he had achieved. He would have luxuriated in the approbation of William Clark, for example, or of the old General. But the prospective gush of appreciation from this girl made him feel merely uncomfortable. However, when she entered she remained too busy to trouble him immediately with her gratitude. She devoted herself to arranging bedding for the baby and her mother. She seemed to be one whose custom was to deal with first things first.

But now Matt had learned something of these people's circumstances from the Frenchman who spoke English. They were the Austin family from Kentucky, whose journey had been delayed so late in the season by the mother's illness that they had been forced to take refuge in this estuary from the floating ice in the river. The Indians, bribed with presents, had at first treated them well. Then the mother had given premature birth to the baby, Austin and his Negro slave had gone ahead on foot to Cahokia in search of help, and the Indians had broken into the barrel of whisky.

The girl turned to Matt again, and again was distracted. The last of the drunken Indians, a fat and slovenly squaw, was being dragged from the cabin.

"Oh, leave *her* here," she commanded. She explained swiftly to Matt. "She's the wet nurse Mr. Austin hired. The baby must have her. She did well enough until she got drunk."

She flew to help the boatmen prop the squaw up against the wall in a sitting position, her head lolling, her great body inert. The girl knelt, with savage singleness of purpose stripped aside the filthy blanket, and with the end of her shawl wiped off the huge, pendulous, yet fruitfully swollen breasts, from which drops of milk were exuding as from the udders of a cow too long unmilked. Matt, moved to a vague male

alarm by the spectacle, could not withhold one mild protest.

"But she's dead-drunk. Aren't you afraid—well—that what she gives may be—er—alcoholic?"

The girl remained fixed in her purpose. "Suppose it is. The baby's starving. He's better off drunk than dead, isn't he?"

Matt made no answer to this simple female logic. She unwrapped the fretting infant and placed him in position. At once he began to nuzzle and then to suck greedily. The girl sank back on her heels, regarding the process with a great relief and yet with a kind of disdain. She glanced up at Matt, as if to include him in the disdain.

"You can tell he's a man-child. He's little enough sense, but nothing will do him but his own way."

She ran back to attend to her mother. Matt watched her. The girl was quite good-looking and the zeal with which she cared for her mother and the baby was certainly commendable. The frank, almost vulgar, way she spoke her mind, and the direct, uncompromising way she dealt with whatever there was that had to be done, seemed to him on the verge of the unwomanly, but this might be explained by the possibility that she was younger, less mature, than her face and figure indicated.

He scowled suddenly as he realized how much thought he was devoting to her. For the moment he had need only to think of his extreme good fortune in recovering his rifle.

## CHAPTER II

NORA sat before the fire brushing her long leaf-brown hair, noting, somewhat guiltily, what she so seldom had leisure to note, that when brushed it developed a silky wave and a fine reddish glint. Around her in the cabin the others slept: her mother, the baby, the squaw, the two boatmen, and the young stranger stretched across the threshold, his rifle on his arm, his tomahawk in his hand.

The first glimmer of daylight was evident through the chinks between the logs, but Nora felt no inclination to sleep. She preferred to sit here, warm and dry and safe, and to think contentedly upon how well, for once, things had turned out. Only a few hours ago misery had seemed their only portion. Then the good things had begun to happen. First the stranger had sprung out of nowhere to chastise the drunken Indians. Next the baby had eaten hungrily. Then her mother's fever had seemed to break and she had drifted into a restful sleep. And finally, faithful black Neb had plowed back from Cahokia with the message from Mr. Austin that the rescue party would arrive with horses by noon. In her life Nora had been far too accustomed to adversity to fail to savor fully this hour of thanksgiving.

It was the arrival of the stranger that had bent everything in this new and happier direction. Matt—Matt Morgan—was his name. There was no real reason she should hesitate to think about his name or to repeat it over to herself, here, all alone, with everyone else asleep. Or even deliberately to think about him, as she had been resisting the temptation to do these last many minutes.

She might as well admit he was already in her mind a man set apart from other men. Her private estimate of men as she had known them ranged from dubious to worthless. They had seemed to her amiable enough, well-intentioned, oddly companionable, but productive only in an abundance of future expectations. Invariably they had been the unresourceful victims of present bad times, bad weather, bad management, and bad luck. They were seldom willing to face and less often able to cope with reality. They took refuge in wishing circumstances were different and in dreaming of an imminent improvement in fortune. But this Matt last night had acted in striking contrast to this common level of male incompetence. He had known exactly what there was to do and had done it with the sure instinct that forces success.

Nora's experience with men had been considerable. Lydia



had seen to that. Nora always thought of her mother as Lydia for their relationship had been less that of mother and daughter than that of sisters, with Nora the elder. Lydia was pretty, lighthearted, very feminine, and possessed of an irresistible appeal for men. So there had always been men around. Nora had no need to count the innumerable suitors who had swarmed during Lydia's brief periods of widowhood; since her own father, there had been three step-fathers. Nora had had intimate opportunity to study, with the calm, candid, cruel perception of a child, this succession of men in the family. It was not unusual in the newer settlements for a woman to survive several husbands, for young active men on the frontier were subjected to many wilderness dangers from which young women were ordinarily shielded, but Nora entertained a growing suspicion that most of these dangers were in part the result of the general ineptitude of men.

Her father, of whom her most vivid memory was that upon the occasions he was home her mother sang and laughed more than usual, had been killed by the Indians, not in battle but in ambush while en route to join St. Clair's army. Lydia's second husband had been crushed by a tree of his own felling and her third drowned when his canoe overturned in the Ohio. But it was not these ultimate tragedies which clouded Nora's recollection of these men. It was the persistent evidence of inadequacy that preceded them—the unforeseen demands, the foreclosed mortgages, the crop failures, the abandoned business ventures, and, most disheartening of all, the perpetual moving in a renewed search for a more fortunate location only in turn to be confronted with the same familiar problems. Nora's life had been haunted by this moving, which had continued to this moment with the ill-considered journey that had brought them last night so near to disaster. When Lydia had married Daniel Austin she had seemed to choose more wisely, for he owned slaves and cattle and horses and lived in a brick house, but once again mortgage and property had proved

but the two faces of the same coin, and the very year of the wedding Austin had hit upon no better recourse than to set off for the farthest edge of the wilderness, even beyond the Mississippi, to claim a doubtful inheritance left him by a sister who had married a Spanish merchant of St. Louis.

Thus at last to have encountered a man as successfully resourceful as Matt had proved himself last night was to Nora an infinitely reassuring discovery. To know that he was lying across the threshold, a protecting bulwark between her and the hazards of the wilderness without, was to know a warm and comforting sense of security she had never before experienced.

The morning light was growing brighter. Moved by a sudden impulse to examine him more closely than she had been able to do in the stress and the shadow of the night before, she crept across to him on her hands and knees until the hair hanging down on either side of her intent face brushed his leather sleeve. Eager to determine if he looked as different from other men as she had concluded him actually to be, she studied him, unashamed, as he slept.

He looked strong enough. Even in repose his limbs and shoulders seemed to have a kind of granite solidity. His hands were big and powerful. His face was thin, angular, with a stubborn jaw, a wide flexible mouth, a long nose, rather deep-set eyes, and ears forced straight out by the coonskin cap. He must be much younger than she had guessed, because his sandy-red beard was quite short and yet as soft and fine as if it had never been trimmed. His eyes were somewhere between a blue and a gray, she decided, before suddenly realizing that they were wide open, staring up into hers steadily and reflectively.

She returned, crabwise, to the hearth. He sat up and drew aside the blanket hanging in the doorway to look out. A shaft of brilliant red light from the rising sun flashed into the shadowy room.

"Turned clear—with a hard freeze," he reported.

"I'll get you some breakfast," she said.

He nodded, stood, shook himself, glanced at the priming of his rifle, and went out. She hastily pinned up her hair and turned to examine the splintered boat-provision box in the corner. It had been ransacked by the Indians but more of its contents had been spilled and scattered than carried off. When he returned she had corncakes browning in the ashes, bacon curling in a pan, and a pot of hot coffee.

At first there was restraint between them, then suddenly they were talking, easily and steadily. Since the others still slept, they spoke in whispers, giving importance to the most simple remark.

"The Indians are sleeping it off in every snowbank around," he said. "Some of them will wake up a little frostbitten."

Nora felt no sympathy. "It would have been that way with us—or worse, possibly—if you hadn't come."

He veered quickly from this topic. "First bacon and coffee I've had for a long time. Tastes good."

"Don't they feed you well at the fort?" she asked, only to keep the talk going.

Matt squirmed. "I only told the Indians I was with Lewis and Clark. I'm not officially signed up with their company. I only—well—hunt for them."

"Then you're not going with them in the spring?"

"Certainly I'm going with them."

"But nobody knows where they're going, or how far—or anything." There was a sudden edge in her tone.

He stopped eating and looked at her with a strange intensity.

"Haven't you ever wanted anything—really wanted it—until you couldn't stand it if you didn't get it?" He shook his head. "No—I don't imagine you have."

"Of course I have." She too was intense now. "I know exactly what you mean. You want something until you can't eat or sleep from thinking about it."

He nodded, a little surprised but understandingly, and resumed eating. "I want to go farther than any man has

gone before." He looked up at her with belated curiosity. "What do you want?"

She rose to her knees, accepting the implied challenge. "I want to find a place and stay there—and stay there and stay there." The words continued to pour from her recklessly. "I want a garden and to watch it grow—and a root cellar and a springhouse and a smokehouse, places to keep things we need—and to know we'll be there to use them—and I want to stay there the next spring to keep on planting. I want Lydia and Mark and Luther and Frank all under one roof—the whole family together for once, and all eating and sleeping in the same house—and not one of us afraid we'll be running off in all directions the next minute. I want——"

She broke off suddenly as she saw Matt's growing bewilderment, sank back, and smiled apologetically. "I must sound all mixed-up. Well, we are—I mean that's the way my family has always been. Lydia—that's my mother—just married Mr. Austin last winter. Mark—he's the baby there. And Frank and Luther are my younger half-brothers. Lydia has been married three times since my father died. You see *we are* mixed up. My brother Frank is staying with Lydia's cousin's family in Marietta and my brother Luther with his father's aunt in Limestone. They've been handed around among the relatives most of their lives—the poor little half-orphans. The only reason we've as many of the family in one place as we have here is that Mr. Austin wouldn't start on this trip without Lydia and she wouldn't come without me—and the baby, well, he came a little before we expected him. I don't suppose I'm making things any clearer, no matter how I run on——"

She broke off again as an Indian baby suddenly crawled out of the woodpile and stood up. He was a sturdy child, well past two, and his face was black with indignation. His scowling gaze roved over the cabin until it reached the snoring wet nurse, whereupon he screamed with rage, darted

to her, and began beating on her with his fists. She roused slowly, became aware without resentment that her assailant was her own child, and drew him under her blanket, where he fell with continued ferocity upon his breakfast. The uproar had awakened Lydia and Mark and the baby began at once to cry. The Indian woman blinked, grinned amiably, and made hospitable gestures, indicating indulgently that there was ample supply for both children. Nora carried little Mark across to her and presently the woman was dozing complacently with white child and red clasped impartially to her bosom. Nora hurried back to Lydia.

Lydia smiled up at her and whispered, "I'm feeling so much better, darling." She nibbled with interest at a piece of corncake dipped in coffee and drifted back into her former peaceful sleep.

Nora became aware that Matt had left at some moment during the recent commotion. There swept over her a sudden fear that he might have gone, that he might have disappeared into the wilderness with as little warning as he had emerged from it. She ran to the doorway and looked out. The sun was well up now. The dark firelit glitter of last night's sleet had become a blinding frozen brilliance, with every tree and snowbank sheathed in ice. Most of the Indians were up, huddled shivering around the embers of the burned hut. But Matt was nowhere in sight.

Nora snatched up her cloak and ran out to look more widely. With relief she saw him standing on a spit of land extending out into the river, looking intently off into the distance. When he saw her he beckoned to her to join him. It was ridiculous to be made so pleased by the invitation, she realized even as she ran eagerly to him.

She shared his excitement when she saw what had attracted his attention. To the south a crescent-shaped marsh, evidently once an earlier bed of the river, broke into the belt of forest bordering the Mississippi. In the center of the marsh, where a clump of leafless trees proved the existence

of an island, the tallest tree rose against its background of white forest and blue sky like a shimmering torch of emerald and flame.

"Why, it looks like a tower of jewels!" Nora gasped. "What is it?"

"I don't know. But I'm going out there to see."

"How far is it?"

"Maybe a mile."

Nora glanced guiltily back toward the cabin. Lydia and the baby were sleeping. Neb and the two boatmen were there. There could be no further danger from the sober and chastened Indians.

"I want to go with you," she declared. He looked around at her, startled that a mere girl should wish to investigate something in the midst of a frozen marsh.

"I want to see, too," she explained.

His glance dropped dubiously toward her feet, hidden beneath the hem of her gown. "You'll find it rough going out there in the marsh."

"I don't care." She was urgent now. To accompany him had suddenly become an important project.

"Let's see what you have on your feet," he demanded.

She lifted the hem of her homespun dress, disclosing heavy woolen stockings and strong low shoes. He shook his head. "They won't do."

"What's the difference if my feet get wet?" she argued. "I can dry them again."

He still shook his head. "You'll keep breaking through and the ice will cut your legs."

Something obscure but very real seemed at issue between them.

"Then I will go by myself," she threatened.

He grinned down at her. "You really want to go, don't you?"

"Why are you always surprised to discover I am capable of wanting something?"

He ignored the outburst: "Wait," he advised.

He ran to the cabin and returned with a pair of Indian leggings. They were old and dried and the leather was stiff as a board.

"Noticed these in the rafters this morning," he said. "They'll do." He knelt before her. "Lift up your dress." She obeyed. "Higher."

The leggings as he held them up were so long they would have come to her hips. She was relieved that he did not expect her dress to be raised to this extreme. Instead he drew his knife and began to cut the leggings to knee-length and then to tie them at knee and ankle with thongs. She was aware of her own inconsistency. She had been dissatisfied when he had seemed to regard her as a mere girl; now she was dissatisfied when he seemed to regard her as no more than a boy.

Then she giggled as she imagined how Lydia's eyebrows would go up were she to catch a glimpse of her with a man crouched beneath her upraised skirts. On second thought, Lydia would no doubt be somewhat relieved. Lydia was often concerned over her daughter's lack of feminine traits. Nora wondered if it was a feminine trait to be pleased by this man's kneeling before her, engaged in the arrangement of her footgear. At any rate the agreeable sensation grew upon her when they set out together and persisted even when it became evident with their first descent into the marsh that getting across it was to prove all of the task Matt had forecast.

The reeds and rushes rose so high around them that they could see only the sky overhead. The frozen tufts and hummocks were glazed and slippery, so that to get ahead they often had to get down on hands and knees, while in the bogs between occasionally the thin ice broke, dropping them into the cold muck and ooze below. When they sank to too great a depth, he lifted her in his arms. Always he kept a firm hold on her, not by the hand but with a hard grip on her wrist, so that it was as if she could feel the strength of him flowing to and fro between them.

"I told you," he reminded her as they floundered on.

"I don't mind it," she affirmed.

Actually, she gloried in it. She could be happy were their struggle together to go on and on. She felt that neither weariness nor fear nor even discomfort could threaten her. She was intensely conscious of the strength in him, which was like a bond between them and which redoubled her own. Together they seemed to her invulnerable. Once when he slipped and she was able to hold him up she was overjoyed.

As they approached the island, and well before they could see through the overhanging reeds, the nature of the phenomenon was suggested by the chattering clamor ahead. Matt paused to listen, then grinned.

"Parrakeets," he exclaimed. He saw Nora's blank look. "In winter they roost in big flocks. That bright color came from a treeful of them."

But knowing what to expect did not prepare Nora for the spectacle that came into view when they burst through the edge of the marsh to the shore of the island. The miracle when understood was no less a marvel.

The tower of jewels was a gigantic, sparkling, frost-encrusted sycamore in whose ice-sheathed branches perched hundreds of the birds, ruffling their feathers in the sun, their constant movements as they bobbed their red heads to preen their metallic green plumage causing the whole tree to gleam as if lighted by innumerable candles.

And this view of the shining tree was but the first revelation of almost unbearable wild beauty. The birds suddenly erupted into screaming flight, the flock assembling, breaking apart, and reassembling overhead. In the bright sunlight their beating wings encircled the upward-staring, earthbound intruders with continuous streaks and wreaths of flashing fire.

To Nora it was a moment of sheer magic. She was overwhelmed by her emotion. There was even a faint thrill of terror in her ecstasy. For to share such an extraordinary



experience with this man seemed to draw them inseparably together. It was something like that breath-taking moment at one of Lydia's weddings when there was no further escape from the fact Lydia was once more committing herself to union with another man. Only, this moment with this man seemed more irrevocable than had any of Lydia's ritualistic acknowledgements. Here in the midst of this frozen waste, under this endless blue sky, beneath this shimmering canopy of flashing wings, they were utterly alone and therefore so much more together than it was ever possible to be in the presence of other people.

She clasped her hands about Matt's arm and looked up at him, fearing and expecting to read in his eyes an understanding and equal emotion. But he did not look down to meet her gaze. He was aware neither of her nor of the beauty overhead. He was watching with sharp interest the stag, disturbed by the tumult, stepping daintily and inquisitively from the thicket. Shaking off Nora's grasp, Matt raised his rifle and fired.

The shot broke the charm. The clamor of the birds rose to a discordant shriek as the flock wheeled in flight toward the distant forest, taking from the island all color but a cold and ghostly white and leaving it to a cheerless silence broken only by the rasp of the buck's death agony among the ice crystals of a frozen bush.

Matt swiftly reloaded, drew his hunting knife, and ran forward to his thrashing quarry. Nora followed slowly, stumbling a little. She felt drained of all emotion. Even the empty feeling in the pit of her stomach had no meaning more significant than to remind her that in her excitement at breakfast she had eaten nothing herself.

Matt, however, was full of vitality and of a strange interest in his achievement.

"Look," he exulted, prodding the carcass with his toe. "Fat. Most deer this time of year are thin. Hardly fit to eat. But this one is still in just as good condition as last fall." He looked around at the margins of the island. "You can

see why. They can't get to these islands to graze until the marsh freezes. Then the deer smart enough to come out here find plenty left to eat. Look at the dried pea vines, rushes, meadow grass. Look where they paw through the snow to get at the pecans and beechnuts on the ground."

He was not even addressing her. He was merely giving voice to his preoccupation. But when he looked around he did notice her wan face.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she answered.

Nothing, she reflected bitterly, except that she was tired, and wet, and cold, and hungry, and miserable, and a fool.

### CHAPTER III

MATT began methodically to butcher his kill, finding in the familiar, prosaic occupation timely refuge from the strange tension that had so recently disturbed him. There had been one moment, just before the stag stepped into view, when he had been startled, as when the silence of the forest is suddenly broken by an unanticipated and unaccountable sound. That moment of alarm had come to him when he had chanced to notice Nora's face, upturned toward the canopy of wings, shining as with some inner light so that she seemed for a second less a mere red-checked frontier girl in a blue stocking cap than an ethereal being not quite of this world. After that one glimpse he had not dared look at her again and had found her very presence near him disquieting. He had been oppressed by the sense that something unknown and mysterious was expected of him and at the same time by the fear that any word said or unsaid or any sign made or withheld might take on a significance he had not intended.

He had welcomed the sight of the buck, reacting to it as instinctively as a hunting dog does to a fresh scent. Running forward had been like moving back into the world of

reality where all was normal and natural and as he knew it to be. There was more than the comforting reassurance that accompanied unforeseen fortune in hunting; there was the deeper reassurance that his actions were again of a pattern with the purpose toward which all his actions for months had been shaped.

Nora was seated on a log at some little distance, her gaze fixed abstractedly on the forested shore toward which the birds had fled. She looked tired and subdued. He felt the generous impulse to share with her the significance of what had happened.

"See," he said, holding up a strip of fat. "I told you he was in fine shape. On the headwaters of Wood River there's a beaver marsh with islands something like this. I'll bet there'll be deer wintering there, too. Along in the spring when most venison is really worthless maybe I can show up at the fort with some fat meat. That'll prove the kind of hunter I am."

Her gaze came around to him blankly, as if she had not heard clearly what he had said. She shivered.

"Will you be very long? I'm beginning to get cold."

"Thought it might be worth while packing this back with us," he explained, his knife darting back and forth in long, sure strokes. "I don't imagine there'll be any more trouble with the Shawnee, but it might just keep things running a little smoother if there's plenty of meat in camp today."

"You're right, naturally," she agreed.

When he had washed his hands with snow and swung the carcass to his shoulder, she rose and walked on ahead into the marsh. As she passed him he saw how pale she was. All the glow had gone out of her, as the color had drained from the island with the flight of the birds.

As he watched her struggling on before him, she seemed a figure much smaller and weaker and more defenseless than the one he remembered laughing at his shoulder during their outward journey. She looked like a tired, stray child. To watch her floundering on, unaided, saddened him. She

had for him now a definite and inescapable appeal, not at all like the confused alarm he had felt in that moment under the candlebird tree when her person had seemed bright with an unreal beauty.

But this surge of sympathy began almost at once to seem something equally disordered and threatening. His thinking became confused again. It was as if he had stepped into a whirlwind. Not a big wind that might carry him away, but an irritating little wind that ruffled his clothes, blew off his cap, and threw dust in his eyes.

She fell down, and he called out to her, "Wait a minute—let me help you."

She rose and pushed on, calling back over her shoulder: "You've got all you can carry already. I can get along."

They found the camp in commotion and the Indians cowering in new apprehension. The rescue party had arrived from Cahokia. Daniel Austin came running to meet them. Matt found him a handsome, agreeable, most articulate gentleman, evidently possessed, whatever his other qualities, of a genius for enlisting the aid of others. Half the population of Cahokia had returned with him, volubly eager to assist.

Austin clasped Nora in his arms. "Nora darling, I'll never forgive myself for what you and Lydia have suffered!" he cried. He held her away from him in order to study her face and then embraced her once more. "But it's almost worth it to come back and find you safe after all." He kissed her on the forehead and on the cheeks.

This public display of sentiment caused Matt to stir uncomfortably. He started to move on. Austin turned from Nora to Matt. Since both Matt's hands were occupied with holding his rifle and the legs of the deer on his shoulder, Austin seized him by the forearms, which he shook earnestly.

"And you, sir," he said. "I've been told what you did—single-handed. You are a hero, if you will forgive my saying so. There are no words with which I can properly thank

you—no fashion in which I could possibly repay you—for what you have done for me and mine.” He released Matt’s arms and gripped his shoulder, smiling still more warmly. “If by any chance you are traveling in the direction of St. Louis it would be a pleasure to have you join us.”

“No,” said Matt, “I wasn’t going that way.”

A brief faint cry rose from the baby in the cabin. Austin whirled and ran to the open doorway. Matt swung the deer carcass to the ground. Several of the crouching Indians edged toward it. He found himself looking around for Nora. She had disappeared. Then his attention was caught again by Austin.

At the cabin door Austin had ceased to run and was now tiptoeing smilingly toward his wife’s couch. Evidently Lydia had not been awakened by the party’s arrival. The Frenchmen from Cahokia crowded around to peer through the doorway, excited by this pleasant spectacle of a family’s reunion.

Austin knelt slowly beside the pallet. His wife’s eyes opened and she gave a low, breathless cry. “Dan—you’re back! I’ve missed you so.” She half-rose and wound her arms around his neck. He bent lower over her, murmuring words of endearment. The Frenchmen exchanged glances, nodding and beaming. Several wiped their eyes. Even the lone American among the Cahokia contingent, a bearded drover, nudged Matt and cleared his throat.

“Don’t reckon I ever seen a man that set more store by his family,” he remarked approvingly.

Matt had looked away quickly, but before his eyes there persisted the image of the convulsive grasp of the sick woman’s arms about the man’s neck. He felt a tightening in his own throat and with it a kind of terror, like that of a child awakening in the dark to find himself half-smothered by his blanket. For one frightening second he imagined himself in Austin’s place. Such a man could no longer think about the direction in which he was going. Always there would be those clinging arms dragging him back.

The air in the Shawnee camp seemed suddenly heavy with a sense of restraint. The impulse, as definite as the instinctive alarm of a wild animal at the first hint of some unknown danger, to slip from the noisy, crowded camp into the lonely silence of the forest became irresistible.

Cutting around back of the cabin, he came unexpectedly upon Nora. Only minutes before, he had caught himself looking around for a glimpse of her, but now the sight of her gave him a guilty start. She was standing against the cabin wall, her head tilted back against the rough logs, her eyes closed. She was not aware of his nearness. But to go without speaking to her seemed an unnecessary admission of cowardice.

"Nora," he said. Her eyes opened. "I guess I'll be getting along."

She made no protest. There was nothing whatever in her attitude to justify his obscure dread of facing her. She stepped toward him, giving him one outstretched hand.

"As Daniel said, there's no way we can ever thank you enough, so there's no use trying. Good-by, Matt—and good hunting."

Her friendly, natural smile made his uneasiness seem merely foolish.

"Well—take care of yourself," he stammered.

At the edge of the forest he turned to wave to her, but she was no longer in sight.

Homing toward his familiar hunting grounds, he ran hard for hours. By the time he was exhausted his normal self-assurance was re-established. He had shaken off the sense of relief at escaping something. His mind no longer teemed with the varied details of his adventure at the Shawnee camp. That episode was a memory already fading into its proper perspective. He could even decide that the loss of his rifle had taught him something of importance to his purpose. He knew now that it was not enough merely to wait until spring. There were things he had to do.

He explored the marsh about the headwaters of Wood River. On the largest and most inaccessible of the islands there was a fine herd of fat deer. He took care not to disturb them. The island was a storehouse upon which he could draw in the time of his greatest need.

He no longer kept at too great a distance from the expedition's winter camp but hovered periodically in the neighboring forests, contriving occasionally to encounter hunters from the camp in order to gossip with them under cover of making them presents of game. Thus he learned of Lewis's tedious negotiations with the difficult Spaniards who for months refused to recognize Napoleon's sale of the Louisiana Territory to the United States and almost to the last warned the expedition away from the Missouri; and of Clark's once relaxing enough even to attend a ball in St. Louis; and of the extreme trouble the young captains were having, as the General had foreseen, to keep their reckless, headstrong followers in order during the irksome winter; and that on April 1 Lewis and Clark had made a final formal selection of the twenty-five men who were to accompany them. This last knowledge disturbed Matt mightily, but he remembered the General's counsel that the last moment was the best moment and held back another two weeks.

By now he knew his island project to be a genuine inspiration. For many weeks now most venison, the main meat supply of the expedition's camp, had been lean and stringy and unpalatable. An unexpected supply of tender deer meat would be not only a welcome delicacy but a compelling demonstration of his skill as a hunter. Therefore the second week in April Matt returned to the island in the marsh, where he managed to shoot seven of the choicest among the unwary heard before the remnant bolted into the reeds.

But his scheme, commencing in the glow of triumph, sagged presently into the dusk of imminent defeat. He built a raft of cedar on which to freight his cargo. It cost him two days and nights of tremendous exertion to drag his raft

over beaver dams and pole it through the maze of weed-grown channels that led from the marsh. Then the weather turned warm and showery, so that the chances of reaching his destination with the meat still fresh were diminishing hourly.

This led him when he reached the creek that drained the marsh to push on with more haste than care. The stream was swollen with spring rains and thaws and its flood interlaced with barriers of fallen timber. During the icebound wintering, when he had learned so much of general woodcraft, there had been no opportunity to gain experience with the very special difficulties of wilderness navigation. Many times he had to unload and drag his raft around obstructions. Three times his craft capsized, forcing him to flounder and dive in the icy water to retrieve his precious cargo.

The third ducking left him so chilled that he realized he could not go on until he had warmed himself. In despair over the waste of time, he built a fire, wrung out his garments and hung them over it to dry, and crouched beside the flame, turning and twisting his half-frozen body to the heat like a roast on a spit.

He was so unwarily concerned with himself and his trouble that it was not until he had begun to become warm again that he discovered the man sitting on a rock not far away, watching with the odd concentrated curiosity characteristic of the solitary wilderness wanderer when he has chanced upon the activities of some other human occupant of the forest. He might have been sitting there watching for some time, possibly ever since the raft had overturned.

When the stranger saw his presence had been detected he rose and came forward. He was George Drouillard, chief hunter of the expedition. Drouillard was tall and lank and dark, with a saturnine, almost expressionless face in which only his eyes were quick and keen. He was a Frenchman, but had spent some of his earlier life in Kentucky, which had led him to assume an exaggerated Anglo-Saxon taciturnity. He glanced at the seven carcasses.



"Fat," he pronounced. His tone indicated mere judgment, without hint of surprise or approval.

"Thought they might like some—down at camp," said Matt.

"Good." This time there was the barest suggestion of approval.

Since the meat was destined for his camp, Drouillard evidenced a readiness to take charge. He was not one to waste two words where one would do, or one word where a gesture sufficed. His gesture suggested that Matt get his clothes on. While Matt dressed, Drouillard lifted the seven carcasses and tied them to the limbs of trees, beyond the reach of wolves. When he saw Matt was ready, he kicked the bare raft out into the current and beckoned to Matt to accompany him on foot, indicating with a gesture toward camp that men would be sent to bring in the hanging venison.

Matt was relieved to be freed of his struggles with the stream, but uneasily aware that this was not working out as he had expected. He had planned to arrive at the camp in triumph bringing with him the spoils of his hunt. However, Drouillard's method clearly was quicker and more certain.

For months Matt had looked forward to the time he would once more confront William Clark. He had speculated endlessly, at times with fear and at other times with hope, on what might happen, what might be said, what would be done. He was as familiar with the form and appearance of the expedition's winter quarters as he had ever been with the schoolmaster's house. From a distance he had observed the activities centered there since the day the first log was cut and set in position. Yet when at Drouillard's heels he passed into the little stockade he found himself in no way prepared for the scene before him.

The men of the expedition were drawn up in a stiff military formation. The two young captains stood side by side before their quarters. There was a man standing alone by

the tail of a cart. He was stripped to the waist and his skin was startlingly white in contrast to the tan on his hands and face. A sergeant was reading from a paper:

"The Court are of the opinion that the Prisoner is Guilty of being absent from camp without leave, it being a breach of the rules & articles of War and do Sentence him to receive twenty-five lashes on the naked back."

The severe formality of the business was the more odd in that it was accompanied by none of the martial display that customarily surrounds military ceremony. No one was in uniform. Even the young captains were garbed like common backwoodsmen. But the air of discipline was there. Prussian grenadiers could have stood no more impassively than did these leather-shirted hunters and boatmen.

The sergeant folded the paper and turned toward the prisoner. Two men stepped from the ranks to hold his wrists, but he waved them aside and of his own volition bent over the rail of the cart to receive his punishment. The sergeant moved into position with the whip, swishing it through the empty air two or three times.

With the first blow a long red welt dotted at intervals with spots of blood appeared on the victim's smooth white back. With every deliberate swing of the whip the sergeant grunted his count. "Four. Five. Six." The prisoner's hands were gripping the sides of the cart. He was striving not to flinch but shivering in spite of himself each time the whip swung. His whole back was scarlet now and blood was trickling down to collect along his waistband.

Matt knew the reputation of many of those men standing there quietly in ranks. Ordinarily, they could have been counted on, with or without excuse, to start all manner of brawls and uproars. They had been selected precisely because they were hardy, reckless, ready for anything. Yet they were looking on without protest or even a sign of resentment while one of their number was whipped like a convict for a minor misdemeanor. Upon these wild, free spirits had already been imposed, before the expedition had

even started, a regime as strict as that of any regiment of the Guards or ship of the line.

Matt longed more than ever to be one of these chosen and destined few. But with a sinking heart he realized that here were no signs of the trouble that the General, with his long experience with the unruliness of Western assemblies, had forecast, no suggestion of probable misconduct or desertions that might make a place for the last-minute volunteer.

"Twenty-five."

The sergeant laid aside his whip, picked up a pail of water, and dashed it over the bleeding back. The prisoner straightened and turned, making a great effort to disown his pain. Matt saw the twisted little grin on his face. He seemed trying to give the impression that he had had his fun and that it had been worth the consequences. There was even an indication of pride like that of a seaman who boasts of belonging to a particularly taut ship.

The detachment broke ranks and the men swarmed around the cart, yelling and laughing. The prisoner accepted his comrades' ironic congratulations on his fortitude with good humor. Lewis and Clark looked on for a moment with half-smiles. They had reason to be content with the morale of their little party. Lewis turned into headquarters. Drouillard nudged Matt and started forward. Clark saw them coming and waited at the door.

Drouillard addressed Clark respectfully but wasted no words on his commander. "Kill seven deer," he said, indicating Matt. "Fat." There was a faint emphasis on the last word, which, coming from him, suggested at least the equivalent of seven unicorns.

Clark looked at Matt with interest. "How much?"

Matt shook his head. "Just thought you could use them."

"You the man that's been sending in game off and on?"

The direct question confused Matt. He nodded. Clark looked at Drouillard.

"Where?"

Drouillard nodded his head towards the woods. "Five mile."

"Take as many men as you need and go get them."

Drouillard walked away. Clark looked at Matt again. There seemed to be the faintest wrinkle of amusement around his eyes.

"Your gear's not quite so new as it was."

So he did remember. Matt was not sure whether this was good or bad. He found himself explaining, which he had not intended to do. "I wintered in the Illinois back country." His nod toward the edge of the forest was almost as casual as Drouillard's had been. He forced himself to meet Clark's steady look.

"Want to go real bad, eh?"

Matt's throat and lips were so dry he could hardly speak. "Yes," he said.

Clark at least was giving the matter some thought. There was no longer that suggestion of a smile around his eyes. "Well," Clark said, after a moment, "our detachment's been complete since the first of the month." Matt's heart practically stopped. "But I think I'd like Captain Lewis to see you just the same."

Matt followed Clark into the headquarters hut. Lewis was writing at a table. He looked up quickly, not at the stranger but at Clark. There was an astonishing bond between these two.

"Captain Lewis, I want you to ——" Clark broke off and turned to Matt with a grin. "Why, even yet I don't know your name."

"Matthew Morgan."

Lewis came around the table and shook hands with Matt. He was younger than Clark, and smiled more frequently. But there was iron in him, too. Matt sensed at once the force beneath the engaging exterior. This was an enterprise happy beyond compare in that it had not one but two great commanders.

"This boy came to me at Clarksville last September,"

Clark explained. "I turned him down because he wasn't a hunter. He took off into the woods and wintered alone. He had some idea of proving he could hunt. At any rate, he's proved it to Drouillard—and that takes some doing."

Matt said nothing while two pairs of the keenest eyes in the world studied him. His leather shirt had shrunk from repeated wettings until it fitted him like the skin on an animal. His hair had grown down to his shoulders and the curling fringe of a boy's first beard added a certain fierce maturity to his expression. His powder horn, knife, and tomahawk, which when Clark first had seen him had seemed to dangle incongruously, now were as much a part of him as were his arms or his legs, and the long rifle fitted his hands so naturally that he was not aware of it as he leaned on it.

The two captains exchanged glances.

"I do wish we had a place for him," confessed Lewis frankly.

"I thought we might send him upriver with Drouillard," said Clark.

"Perfect!"

Matt looked from one to the other, puzzled, but with sudden new hope springing within him. Clark laughed. It effected an amazing transformation in his personality. Unlike Lewis, in Clark it was the softer side of his nature that remained hidden.

"Perhaps we owe you some explanation," he said. "I should say at any rate you've earned one. It's a fact the detachment is complete. I admit there are one or two that don't satisfy us too well, but it would have a bad effect on the others if we changed our minds at this late hour. So we can't take you on now—not officially. But we're sending Drouillard up the Missouri two or three weeks in advance. We want him to take a look at the country along the lower river and get some idea about game so we'll know what we can count on when the main expedition comes along. We must live off the country as much as we can—

particularly the early part of the voyage—so we can save our flour as long as possible. If you want to go with him, we can pick you up when we do him. It'll be too late then to send you back."

Matt, realizing suddenly how tired he was, dropped weakly on a bench.

## CHAPTER IV

MANY times during the winter Matt had looked from the snowy Illinois hills across the Mississippi to the open gateway of the Missouri. Now, in the shadowy dawn, with the paling sky overhead rustling with the wings of migrating northbound sea birds, he was in the prow of a canoe headed for that gateway. The ribs of the canoe pressed buoyantly against his knees as the fragile bark craft glided over the surface of the water. The wind, whispering softly against his face, gave him the sensation that he was flying. Before him was the Missouri and beyond, at whatever distance but still just beyond, rose the Shining Mountains.

The great river gave swift evidence of its violent nature. The pale clear water of the Mississippi was pushed toward the eastern shore by the stormy, clay-colored surge from the west. Long before the canoe reached midstream Matt could see the dividing line between the blue water and brown. Crossing that line was like crossing a visible equator marking the boundary between two worlds.

The heaviest flow was not due at the mouth of the Missouri for two months, but even in late spring the river presented the rude aspect of floodtime. Its turbulent current with opaque with sediment; all manner of flotsam and jetsam, including whole trees, tossed on its surface; from its depth rose the acrid muddy smell of decay and destruction. The pleasant breeze became a head wind, the canoe began to bounce harshly against the waves raised by the unruly current, and it was necessary for Drouillard at the

steering paddle in the stern to swerve continually to avoid striking debris.

It was also necessary for Matt to make his bow paddle count. This, he speedily discovered, required more than strength and willingness. The harder he tried, the more embarrassing were his failures. If he dipped deeply, the canoe tipped; if not so deeply, the paddle splashed foolishly on the surface. He kept glancing back at Drouillard, hoping for some hint of guidance. But no flicker of expression crossed the veteran's face. In Drouillard's school the neophyte was expected to catch on. Grimly Matt devoted himself to the hard lessons of trial and error, to the train of cause and effect that ran from the water through the blade of his paddle and his weight and strength to the balance of the canoe. Gradually he began to sense through his knees the mercurial buoyancy of the craft and the degree to which his body was a part of it, to watch the swirling eddies and to know when to deflect his stroke, when to bear down hard.

But it was hours before he felt free to look up and around. They had entered a smoother, calmer channel, sheltered from the main current by a string of little islands. In the warm spring sunlight the whole vista as far as he could see was Arcadian in its peace and beauty. The Missouri, so often hostile, repellent, could change around any bend, to reveal without warning the most inviting prospect, soft, rich, promising.

The little islands seemed floating on the river, idyllic ships tapestried in the pale green of the budding cottonwoods, the brighter green of the leafing willows, and the strong dark green of the cedars. The northern riverbank was splendid with the massed color of the darkly glowing redbud set against the snow-white blooms of wild pear and wild plum. Above stretched miles of open verdant prairie, rippling gently and fruitfully, starred with spring flowers.

Matt drew a long, satisfied breath, consciously permitting himself to enjoy the view. He was now in the new country of which he had dreamed; from now on every hour, every bend

of the river, would reveal new views. The appreciation of something nonessential was no longer a distraction from his purpose. His purpose was achieved. He was embarked on the great journey.

The riot of color reminded him of the candlebird tree and this in turn of Nora, of whom, no matter what his concentration on more pressing matters, he had thought often enough since their parting, but of whom his memory had failed to retain any clear image. She had remained in his recollection a kind of vague, pleasing, somewhat disturbing presence, indistinct, without face or form. Now, to his surprise, he suddenly could see her as clearly as if she stood before him, even to the dimple in her chin and the glint of sun on the tendril of hair escaping the blue stocking cap. On her lips was that calm, friendly smile that had illuminated their moment of farewell. It was as if his perceptions, offguard, had suddenly sharpened, or to be more honest with himself, he reflected, as if some inner willfulness had overruled his imagination until this moment when it was too late for anything to distract or deter him. At any rate it was a pleasure to be able now to remember the way she looked. When he returned from the Shining Mountains, he decided, he would look around in St. Louis until he saw her again. Drouillard's grunt of warning recalled him to the fact that another tree was bearing down on them.

They were in rough water again and Matt was obliged to take thought to each successive stroke. This added immeasurably to the labor and began eventually to exhaust even his great strength. Meanwhile, Drouillard swung on tirelessly.

It was with relief that in late afternoon Matt glimpsed the low-roofed cottages of the little French settlement of St. Charles, at once the first and the last white habitation of any consequence on the river. He took it for granted this was to be the destination of their first day's journey. People of the village ran down to the shore to wave and beckon, excited by the rare prospect of visiting strangers. But Drouillard held to midstream and continued doggedly upriver.



Slow anger stirred in Matt. It was perhaps natural that Drouillard should wish to try the new hunter's stamina. Very likely he had been instructed to do so. But for any man's first day this one was being stretched beyond all reason. Drouillard must be bent on breaking him. Resentment revived Matt's energy. He made up his mind that no degree of exhaustion would force him to the point of yielding. He drove the paddle harder and deeper. Drouillard merely kept on, paying no more apparent attention to his companion than to the receding people of St. Charles.

It was dusk when Drouillard suddenly veered to the shore of an island. Matt stepped out over the bow and drew the canoe up on the beach. He was half-paralyzed from the waist down. His cramped muscles knotted and twitched. Straightening and standing erect was painful and nearly impossible. But he was resolved to betray no hint of this to Drouillard.

However, Drouillard gave no hint that this was other than the ordinary end of an ordinary day's paddling. Stepping ashore, he did not so much as look at Matt. After a quick glance around that appeared to fix every detail of the vicinity in his mind, he spoke one word "Fire," picked up his rifle from the canoe, and disappeared in the shadows up the reed-fringed beach.

Before Matt had the fire well started he heard two shots. Drouillard returned with two plump mallards, their heads neatly shot off. He disemboweled the birds with one stroke of his knife and then plastered the carcasses with mud from the river's edge. Scooping a hole in the sand beside the fire, he pushed half the burning embers into the bottom of the hole, dropped the clay-covered birds in, and finished filling the hole with sand and the remainder of the campfire.

Matt squatted against a sandy bank to watch, and promptly fell asleep. It was quite dark when Drouillard's prodding awakened him. Outlined against the glow of the fire he could just make out the form of Drouillard offering him something that looked like a melon. The melon proved to be hot enough to startle him into full wakefulness. This was one of the plas-

tered ducks, the encircling clay now baked brittle and hard. Rolling it about gingerly in his lap, he began cracking it with his tomahawk. The clay broke off readily, the feathers adhering to each piece, so that presently there was exposed the smooth browned body of the roasted duck.

He leaned back to make sure that when he sank his teeth into it some of the abundant juices would run into his mouth and began tearing at the steaming carcass, working from one end to the other as if attacking corn on the cob. When his hunger was partially satisfied, drowsiness returned and he fell asleep again, with the half-eaten frame of the duck propped against his chin.

Hours later his cramped position aroused him. The stars, very white and clear, seemed just overhead. With his regard fixed contemplatively on the stars he resumed eating the duck, now cold but still delicious. This had been a fine day, he decided.

The next day, and each day thereafter, he became increasingly absorbed in each new revelation of the realities of river travel. For months his imagination had dwelt on the Missouri but no inkling of the actual nature of the great river had reached him. Indeed, it could hardly be considered a river, if the term meant a body of water flowing in a definite course over a bottom and between banks.

Its flow included more than water, for it was thick with streams of liquid mud, islands of decayed vegetation and driftwood, uprooted trees, the bodies of drowned animals.

It had no recognizable bottom. A channel ten feet deep filled in an hour. A mile-long sandbar disappeared in a night. Shoals of sand moved with the current, rippling like water, leaving new channels, forming new bars.

It recognized no banks. Its wild torrent veered and swerved, threshing about like a crazed monster, cutting each year and even each day a new course. From time to time long stretches of bank were undermined, toppling in awful succession hundreds of full-grown trees to be swept away upon the already surcharged current.

Yet the destructiveness of the terrible river was permeated by a universal fertility. Upon every exposed sandbar a miniature forest of willow and poplar seedlings sprang up in a season. Trees on the banks, sycamores, walnut, cottonwood, and linden, attained an enormous size. The tallest were crowned by the foliage of huge grapevines that shot upward from stems the thickness of a man's thigh. Beneath the trees in the bottoms skirting the river, rushes and nettles and briers grew fifteen feet high in a matted impenetrable profusion. At intervals wild fires had cleared the forest to open up stretches of prairie now richly green with young grass that by summer would mount high enough to conceal a man on horseback, Strawberries, blackberries, grapes and pawpaws, walnuts, hickory nuts, pecans, and acorns provided an abundance for the forest population of deer, bear, raccoon, opossum, turkey, and squirrel.

The river itself teemed with life in the waters below and in the air above. In the clearer estuaries of tributary creeks were trout, in pools and lagoons bass and pike, and in the muddy depths of the main stream great catfish weighing up to a hundred pounds. On and above the surface the extraordinary prevalence of bird life enlivened the river with constant clamor and animation. Flocks of passenger pigeons darkened the sky and when they paused to feed denuded the forest. Dignified files of pelicans and raucous clouds of gulls worked their way up the river, bringing the sense of unbounded salt-water horizons thousands of miles into the interior of the continent. Geese, ducks, brant, tern, snipe, swans, swarmed in incredible numbers. Fleets of goslings and ducklings cruised in each backwater. Every sandbar was dotted with eggs.

Nothing, however, about the productivity of the lower river impressed Matt so much as the manifestation of an even more extravagant fecundity above. At this season of the year the Missouri brought down the carcasses of thousands of buffalo, drowned and swept away when herds crossing the river higher up broke through the rotting spring

ice. Some bloated, bobbing like balloons over riffles, others reduced to soggy masses, rolling ponderously in the shallows, most of them floating onward like partly submerged amphibious monsters, the huge hairy bodies moved down with the surge of the current to lodge by the hundreds on sandbars, the points of islands, and against barriers of fallen trees. Hundreds of buzzards wheeled and swooped in pursuit or stood, gorged and lethargic, in solemn groups on the sands. Sometimes the array of stiffly strutting scavengers and of shaggy black buffalo carcasses dominated the river vista for miles.

On the fifth day the Missouri presented another of its varied aspects. The morning grew increasingly hot and sticky. By midafternoon a suffocating sultry calm had settled over the river. The birds fell silent. Not a leaf stirred. The heat became oppressive. Even the current seemed to slow, as if waiting. Drouillard began to look about, to listen, and to sniff the air. He picked up the beat of the paddles and headed the canoe toward the shelter of an island a few hundred yards ahead.

A fringe of dark cloud appeared above the forested ridge beyond the next bend. The fringe became a bulge that swiftly boiled upward until it towered into the sky. There came the distant mutter of thunder, after which the hush that brooded over the river seemed more than ever premonitory.

They would have made the island in good time had not the Missouri struck them an unexpected blow from behind. A fifty-foot clay bank they had just passed collapsed without warning into the river. The brief avalanche was accompanied by a grinding roar, the cracking and rending of trees, and a tremendous upheaval of mud and water. The falling trees flailed downward and outward, their swishing tops reaching almost to the canoe. A great wave coursed upward against the current, bearing the careening canoe on its crest. The wave cast them presently on a gravel bar, rolling both men and craft over and over. Stunned, Drouillard and Matt scrambled about on their hands and knees in the receding

water as it drained off the bar, searching for and retrieving their paddies and rifles. By the time they had recovered and emptied the battered canoe the storm struck.

The first blast of wind drove the light canoe before it, bearing them down upon the writhing mass of fallen sycamores that was heaving and threshing under the combined impact of river and storm. The current, boiling against the barrier, threatened to suck them under the tangle of trees. They were forced to throw themselves into the water and hang by one hand to branches and by the other to the canoe.

It seemed to Matt that for an endless period he was being choked by mud and water, pelted by hailstones, blinded by lightning, and deafened by thunder. Once Drouillard lost his hold and for a moment his weight and that of the canoe depended on Matt's unaided grip. Somehow Matt held on until Drouillard's floundering feet struck a submerged branch against which he could push himself up to renew his grasp. They had lost the paddles, but had managed through it all to cling to their rifles.

A section of the tree mass lower down gave way and the partially dammed river, swirling into the opening with a gurgling roar, began to drop. The tremendous gusts of wind had passed on to bend trees farther downstream. The thunderbolts were now assailing the hills to the eastward. The first violence of the storm was succeeded by a steady drumming rain. Drouillard and Matt worked their way through the heaving treetops to the gravel bar and dragged the leaking canoe through the shallows to the island.

Looking back from the safety of this haven to the fallen trees, Drouillard was moved to an eloquent expression of his thankfulness.

"Close," he pronounced it.

Matt looked around, eager to impress the scene on his memory. The rain was lessening. Gray patches of light were filtering through the scudding clouds. More and more of the fallen trees, breaking loose from the dissolving earth in which they had been rooted, rolled and tossed away down-

stream. The river raced on, brown and muddy, its surface flecked with dirty froth. After the heat of the day the air seemed freezing cold. The drip from the sodden forest was chill. The sun, low in the west, broke through in a flood of hard flat brilliance in which there was no warmth. The multitude of buzzards perched along the banks turned with slow awkwardness to present their backs to the sun and to stretch their wings to dry. The chill and dripping forest, the hard cold light, the somber dun river, the macabre frieze of winged scavengers—all were desolate, smelled of death.

Matt's nostrils dilated. He was exhilarated instead of depressed. Again there was that impression that the river could be his personal enemy, offering not a gateway but a barrier. The thought added zest to his journey.

Drouillard's impatient grunt roused him from his reverie. While the light lasted they found ash for new paddles, bark to mend the canoe, and in the process a fat raccoon for supper. While Matt built a fire, propped up their clothes to dry, and broiled the coon, Drouillard worked on the paddles.

Puffs of warm dry air spread down the river in the wake of the storm. The fire crackled cheerfully. The evening turned serene and beautiful. In the twilight the woods became alive with pleasant cheeps and chirps and rustlings. Fleets of floating waterfowl drifted past complacently. A badger waddled out of the shadows to pause and stare at the fire, too amazed to be afraid. A whippoorwill swooped overhead trailing his melodious repeated cry. Distant colonies of ducks quacked companionably. The heat and storm and struggle of the day were dissolved in peace and contentment.

The moon rose to bathe the crest of the forest in radiance and to soften even the blackness of its shadows. Matt rolled over on his belly to gaze upstream in the direction toward which his imagination was perpetually leading him.

The moon had given the brown river the sheen of burnished pewter. A narrow sandbar, white as alabaster, stretched away until its farther end was lost in the distance. A score or more of deer had emerged to stand and wade in

the shallows and to caper and play on the bar. In the thin mist that lay low over the water the forms of the dancing deer were idealized like figures in a dream. The way ahead up the gleaming river seemed to lead into a world of fantasies and mysteries and the promise of experiences no man had ever imagined.

## CHAPTER V

SINCE losing sight of the distant figures beckoning and gesticulating on the strand at St. Charles, Drouillard and Matt had seen no other human beings. The immense wilderness through which the Missouri coursed was an unrelieved desolation—possessed and enlivened by innumerable creatures of the wild but offering no evidence of the existence of humanity. The river scene suggested the brooding loneliness of a world in which man had not yet been created. Matt was the more struck, therefore, by the picture message on the trees.

Stone Island, unlike the earlier flat, silt-formed islands of the Missouri, was a steep, rock-ribbed little citadel, an outlying fragment of the white limestone cliffs that had suddenly loomed out of the forest on the north bank. As they approached the island three trees were immediately conspicuous. Several feet of bark had been stripped from each and the smooth exposed surface covered with red and black figures. Drouillard was sharply interested. This was the record of exploits left by a war party to inform their friends and taunt their enemies.

"Loway," he pronounced.

The figures were drawn with stiff straight lines with no more than dots for heads, but their attitudes were vigorously pictorial and had a meaning that was clearly discernible. Wounds were designated by drops and streaks of red and the weapons that had caused them carefully specified. The vanquished were represented in wild flight, the dead recumbent.

Two of the tiny figures were captive women, led by strings around their necks, their sex distinguished from the men by grotesquely exaggerated breasts. Horses were indicated by little crescent-shaped hoofmarks. A rude map outlined the range of the campaign with relation to the Missouri.

The story was plain. A war party of fifteen Iowa had set out across the two hundred and fifty miles of intervening prairie and forest to steal Osage horses. Pursuing Osage had recovered the horses, but the Iowa had carried off two captive women and had killed three of the pursuing warriors. Drouillard indicated the weathering on the peeled tree sections.

"Last month," he said, losing interest, since there was no present threat.

But while Drouillard beached the canoe and made camp, Matt, for once unco-operative, lingered by the trees. The small, stiff, splinterlike figures took on a sinister life of their own. They were evil little beings, incredibly enterprising and malignant, emerging suddenly from the apparently unpeopled forest. They were the spirit companions of strange and savage men capable of making the most arduous and distant journeys in pursuit of the opportunity to inflict capricious harm.

Drouillard observed Matt's preoccupation without impatience. In his estimation Indian war sign was a subject worth a new man's prolonged study. After a time he took Matt's arm, grinned, and pointed across the river.

"Manitou," he said.

Matt saw in the white cliffs on the north bank the dark openings of many natural caves. On either side of the cave mouths and emblazoned here and there on prominent cliff surfaces were bold designs and figures, many of them highly colored. These primitive pictures were instinct with the same vigor and force as those on the trees but were of a size to be visible for miles. Most of the figures had the semblance either of human beings or of game animals, indicating that the hopes of the superstitious artists dwelt on fortune in war



or the chase, but there was one fire-snorting monster complete with horns and tail, an unwitting cousin, at least, of the familiar devil of Christian theology.

Matt was pleased when Drouillard decided to wait on Stone Island for the expedition to overtake them, for to him this meant an opportunity to examine with more care the mysterious figures on the trees and cliffs. But to Drouillard the pause was for a more practical purpose, which he had thought out in exact detail. Were they to kill enough game to be of use to the expedition, the meat must be jerked to preserve it. Unlike the dry air of the plains ahead, the atmosphere in these lower Missouri bottoms was often too moist to permit curing by sunlight alone. If the weather took a wet turn, they would be obliged to resort to the aid of wood smoke in the process lest their whole accumulation of meat spoil. Smoke, drifting up into this clear air, might well attract the attention of such a wandering party as had left the figures on the trees. Drouillard had had this in mind when he had selected Stone Island for their hunting camp. The piled rocks formed a natural little fortress, guarded on all sides by the moat of the Missouri, where they could defend themselves against surprise, and which, if beleaguered, stood squarely in the path of the oncoming expedition with its certain relief.

Matt entered on the task with zest. The expedition was still of first importance to him. For some days the only figures upon which his attention was centered were the patterns formed by his gunsight, sharp and dark against the shoulder of deer or bear. The two men hunted and killed and butchered, lined the racks with strips of drying meat, and by turns stood watch, day and night.

There came a morning when Drouillard sniffed the air and looked at the sky as if estimating the weather.

"Soon," he said.

Matt understood that he had decided that the expedition was due to arrive any day. There was already a store of jerked meat on the racks to match the capacity of the boats.

Matt proposed crossing to the north bank to examine more closely the Manitou caves and figures. Drouillard shrugged. He preferred dozing on the beach of the island where he could watch downstream. He had no interest in Manitous but no objection to Matt's going alone. Drouillard's sharp eyes had been observant these last few days, and he considered Matt fully capable of taking care of himself.

Matt launched the canoe, angled across the sweeping current, hid his craft with care on the shore of the mainland, and began climbing the steep cliffs. The first cave was fire-blackened within. The soot when scraped away revealed walls covered with many small obscure designs. Presently he was able to make out that the artist had endeavored to record the vicissitudes of an apparently endless journey during which the dangers from human enemies and spirit enemies had been inextricably mingled.

Matt would have liked to spend the day deciphering this rude journal, but he wanted to see more and clambered onto higher ground, farther from the river, where the cliffs merged with the fantastically eroded limestone ridge that thrust down from the north. Here were more and larger caves and drawings of a more heroic size, including the diabolic monster visible from the island.

As with the little figures on the trees, these greater images on the Manitou Rocks seemed haunted by a sense of loneliness. These strange wild drawings had been made by stranger and wilder men who had appeared briefly to paint and pray and then had slipped away again into the wilderness that masked their every coming and going. The savages who lived in these wilds led an existence as unreal and evanescent as the spirits that in their imagination inhabited these rocks. Strangers might travel through their country, as had he and Drouillard, for days without seeing one. These fertile plains and forests teemed with birds and animals most of which lived and died without knowing man existed. Of all living creatures in the wilderness contemporary man was the least numerous, had upon the complex functioning of natural

laws the least effect, was perhaps, from any point of view, of the least importance. He traveled hundreds of miles to steal two horses or two women from his nearest and equally obscure neighbor. He lingered for a day to make drawings in a secret and isolated place where his work might never be seen. He faded away into the unknown from which he had emerged. And that was all.

Matt knew that spots considered sacred to spirits, like these Manitou Rocks, were visited by chiefs and warriors only for the purpose of making vows or performing certain ceremonies; they were never frequented under other circumstances. Nevertheless, as he climbed and prowled among the caves and crannies of the cliffs, he was continually disturbed by the feeling that he was not alone. The grotesque figures seemed at times to have a life of their own, at times to return his gaze. He found himself often looking back, quickly, and peering around trees before moving forward.

This wariness was deserving of Drouillard's confidence. For Matt was not alone with the figures among the rocks. And he was aware of the Indian's presence some minutes before the Indian sensed his own.

This second intruder among the Manitous was young, lithe and strong, naked to the waist, pale for an Indian, without decoration except little gold rings in his ears, and unarmed except for a knife. Making sure that he had no near companions, Matt crouched back of a fringe of brush and watched.

The young Indian seemed to have a variety of concerns on his mind. He looked nervous and harassed. He kept glancing behind and around as if he suspected the presence of enemies. He was also searching for something, because he continually scrutinized the ground and the stunted shrubbery on the rock ledges. As he drew nearer Matt saw that he was remarkably handsome for a savage, with regular, pleasant features and a frank attractive expression. Suddenly the Indian seemed to have discovered what he was seeking, for he bent swiftly and plucked a sprig of dwarf cedar. As he straight-

ened his nose wrinkled and his head turned instantly. He had caught Matt's scent.

He must have recognized it as the smell of a white man, which to an Indian was a most unmistakable and unpleasant odor. But to Matt's surprise this aroused no sign of fear. Instead he stepped forward eagerly, looking about with delight as if expecting to discover his dearest friend.

"*Qui est là?*" he demanded, his voice quivering with glad astonishment.

This was no Indian. He was a young Frenchman. Many French traders and trappers spent so much time among the Indians that they became virtual Indians in appearance and manner. Matt rose into view.

The Frenchman was ecstatic. "*Ah—un Anglais!*" he exclaimed, seeming to find this a circumstance far better than he could ever have dared hope. "*Moi, je suis Baptiste Atain.*" He patted his chest. "*Bap—c'est moi.*" He remembered their difference in language and repeated his declaration in fair English. "Bap—that is me. Of St. Charles."

"Matt Morgan," said Matt. "Of Kentucky."

"Ah, Kentuckee!" Bap was increasingly astonished and pleased. "They do good men in that Kentuckee."

They shook hands warmly, Bap holding Matt's in both of his. A drowning man could not have clutched more happily the hand of his savior. "You—ah—make the hunt?"

Matt nodded.

Bap's expansive smile went bleak. "*Bap—c'est moi.*" He tapped his chest once more to present himself. "Bap—he is with very big trouble." With gestures far more eloquent than his words he launched into a description of his trouble. "*Ma femme—my woman—she is in the cave—there.*" He pointed to a cave half a mile along the slope. "She is bad—*malade*. She is with the fever. Bap, he must find the *petit cèdre*. That is for the fever."

Matt indicated the sprig of dwarf cedar Bap had just plucked, which was stuck in his belt. Bap was startled when attention was called to this but recovered quickly. He

pointed to the cave and to his own sparkling clear eyes. "Eyes—they bad, too." He pinched one of his eyes closed with thumb and forefinger. "So." His gesture emphasized that it was not his eyes but his woman's eyes that were affected. "Bap must find the *racine jaune*—the yellowroot. That is for the eyes."

Matt nodded and waited. He was correct in assuming there was more to this. Bap clutched his arm appealingly and came to his point.

"*Ma femme*—her head—she is not *tout clair*. She have the terror. She hold to Bap. But Bap he must find the *racine jaune*. He cannot rest by her. She cry."

Matt understood. He liked this young Frenchman. He saw no harm in doing him a service. "You want me to stay with your wife while you look for yellowroot?" Bap nodded triumphantly. "How long will you be?"

Bap made a swift gesture of counting his fingers, then opened and closed his hand two or three times. "So long—no more."

Matt nodded and started up the slope toward the cave.

## CHAPTER VI

BAP was not surprised by Matt's ready acquiescence. He was accustomed to this. His every strong wish was clothed with an enthusiasm that speedily infected others with a similar enthusiasm. He did not ascribe this to any special appeal in his smile, or his appearance, or his disposition, but to the invariable goodness of his intentions, which naturally caused people to trust him. If he wished good for himself, he wished it just as fervently for others. Women, who were so often involved in his wishes, were particularly sensitive to this magnanimous attitude.

Even in the case of the stranger Bap wished him well with his whole heart. Of course, there was the possibility of mischance. Yet Bap was able to assure himself that no great

danger awaited the stranger. If danger waited, it waited for Bap and would not be visited on a clearly guiltless unknown.

He made a brief pretense of continuing his search for yellowroot, then followed Matt, keeping well out of sight, until he had reached a crest of rocks from which he had a good view of Matt's approach to the cave and in particular of the dense thickets of thornberry that clothed the little plateau before the cave.

Bap had by now convinced himself of his correct behavior and had begun to glow with self-congratulation. He felt an immense approval of his own quick wit in recognizing instantly the opportunity presented by his unexpected encounter with the Kentucky hunter. He did not know that extreme danger lay in wait among those thornberry bushes, but there was a chance it did, perhaps one in fifty. It was essential to make certain. Now he had—and, providentially, without risk to himself. There were some risks, of the gravest nature, to which Bap subjected himself with headlong abandon, while gambling, for example, or courting. But there were others he shunned as he would smallpox. There was a nice balance to his judgment on this question. It all depended on the immediate reward at issue.

He watched Matt climb toward the thornberry bushes. In a sense he was subjecting himself to Bap's luck and Bap began to watch with increasing excitement, as if it were his own fate that was about to be revealed. He attempted to calculate the risk, running over swiftly in his mind the events that had led up to this crisis.

In the beginning he had been fortunate, as usual. It had been no simple feat to contrive an elopement with an Osage girl who was at once the daughter of the town's head chief and wife of the tribe's haughtiest warrior. However, he had planned it well, nearly as much entertained by the prospective discomfiture of father and husband as by his prospective pleasure in his new and pretty paramour. The pursuit, as he had foreseen, had at first rushed off on horses toward the

western plains while he and the girl had made their way on foot through the forested river bottoms toward the banks of the Missouri.

But he had not foreseen that the foolish wench would choose this of all times to fall ill. This development robbed the exploit of all zest. The stolen charms that had appeared so enticing when contemplated under the glitter of surrounding guardian knives lost all attraction when the charmer, feverish and whimpering, had to be prodded before him through the woods. Finally, he had had to sling her over his shoulder and carry her, as unromantic a burden as a sack of meal. To free his hands he had given her his rifle to hold, and sometime during the second night she had dropped it. When he discovered the loss he dared not go back to search for it, for by now, he knew, the pursuit must have picked up the right trail.

He had gained the Missouri, crossed it on a precarious raft of logs, and as a last resort had taken refuge in one of the Manitou caves, hopeful that the pursuers might hesitate to penetrate these sacred precincts. But the third night she had babbled so loudly in her delirium that her moans and cries were certain to attract the attention of the avengers were they to venture anywhere near. This threat had driven him from the cave to hide himself for the night at a safe distance.

Studying the situation in the light of morning had not relieved his fears. There was still the possibility that the pursuers were by now lying in ambush before the cave, grimly watching for his return. Bap had tried desperately to persuade himself to forget the whole affair and be on his way. If the girl recovered, she knew how to get back to her town. If she did not, Bap's death would not restore her life. But this he could not quite bring himself to do. It had been his manhood that had lured her away and his manhood would not permit him to abandon her now. Unhappily he had begun to look for dwarf cedar with which to brew a tea to treat

her fever. It was at this most opportune of all moments that the miracle was performed. Mary, Queen of the Angels, produced the forever blessed Kentucky hunter.

The stranger, acting as Bap's unwitting representative, almost his other self, Bap had begun to feel, was now approaching the mouth of the cave. In a second he would spring the trap, if trap there was. Bap held his breath.

He saw Matt take one casual quick glance around at the motionless thornberry bushes and enter the cave. Bap could almost see what was happening within. His eyes becoming accustomed to the dim light, the Kentuckian would perceive the girl on the floor. He would kneel beside her. He would see that Bap had not lied about her being sick, though she had begun to show some signs of improvement last night. He might see also that Bap had lied a little. He might notice there was nothing wrong with her eyes that required the delay to search for yellowroot.

Then it happened. The Osage warriors sprang from the thicket with yells of rage and triumph. Everything ensued just as Bap's most dread imaginings had foreseen it might. Matt and the girl were dragged into the open. Tallee, the husband, drew his knife and prepared to cut off his wife's nose, the classic Indian punishment for adultery. Old Tchungtas, her father, sprang to her defense, pointing out with emotional logic that the white man was not the suspected young French guest but a total stranger, and that therefore his daughter was an unfortunate captive instead of a guilty eloper. Tallee, yielding with reluctance to tribal authority, turned his embittered attention to the remaining criminal.

The punishment for either an adulterer or an abductor was a beating by the injured husband that continued until the victim's relatives and friends came forward with presents of sufficient value to persuade the irate husband to relent. There was no one to ransom the lone white man. In his case the beating would merely continue.

The stranger was divested of his clothes, thrown to the



ground, and bound securely. Tallee deliberately cut and trimmed a club of chokeberry, a wood tough and resilient enough to be commonly selected for ax handles. He took great care with the preparation of the implement. It must be heavy enough to strike cruel blows but not so heavy that under them the victim died too soon.

The beating commenced. Bap endeavored to look away, but he could not. The torment of this man who was suffering literally in his place possessed a horrible fascination for him. He writhed and sweated in an agony of remorse.

Closing his eyes to the sight before the cave below and attempting to close his ears to the sound of Tallee's club, Bap prayed desperately for another miracle. But he knew it was no use. He had not confessed since leaving St. Charles last fall. And his sins had accumulated. This was his problem, which must be met without waiting for the aid of Heaven. He had no assurance that to offer himself would save his friend, the stranger, but there was nothing else for him to do.

He took a long breath and raised himself slowly erect into view of those below. The Indians saw him instantly. They knew Bap well, he had wintered in their village, and his presence here clearly implicated him in the crime, whether it was seduction or abduction. With a yell of rage Tallee dropped the club and seized his gun. The drawn arrows of his companions, as well, were aimed at the insolently motionless figure above. They called on him to come down. Bap was fully aware that he had risen in this moment to a heroic stature. It was for him a consciously dramatic gesture that he took a last long slow look around the horizon at the beautiful world in which he had found so much pleasure during his twenty short years.

Suddenly his Spartan composure was disrupted. He began to tremble and blink incredulously. For a miracle had again been performed. There on the river below, not half a mile away at the foot of the cliffs, a veritable armada was ascending the Missouri. There was a large keelboat with a cannon in the prow. And two brightly painted pirogues. This fleet

was manned by more than thirty armed white men. Surely the Queen of Heaven had forgiven him again, for nothing less than her direct intercession could have materialized aid so astounding.

Despite his tremendous excitement Bap kept his wits about him. The rescue was imposing in appearance, but still so far away that Talle had ample time to dispose of Bap and his Kentucky friend before taking flight. Bap therefore gave no sign revealing what he had seen but continued to turn until he was looking down the northern slope behind him, which was hidden from the view of the Indians around Matt. Speaking in Osage so that Tchungtas and Talle could not possibly miss the import, Bap, with the calm tone of a leader, assured his non-existent allies on that side that their enemies, the Osage, were nicely surrounded and that the time had come to close in on their helpless prey.

The Indians might have suspected a trick, but it was only natural to take one look behind them toward the Missouri in the direction they must retreat if Bap were telling the truth and they were actually threatened. Thus they saw with an astonishment even greater than had been Bap's, because it was a painful rather than a happy shock, the extraordinary flotilla in the river below. Fear that they might indeed be surrounded threw them into a panic. Snatching up the girl, they dived for the thornberry thickets and wriggled off down the opposite slope like so many invisible snakes.

Bap scrambled down and ran to Matt. His thanksgiving overflowed when he found him still breathing.

## CHAPTER VII

MATT had barely noticed the first few blows. Such rage had possessed him that he was unaware of pain. He was not angry with the Indians. Their attitude seemed no more than natural. He was angry with the young Frenchman who with gratuitous ill will had directed him into this

disaster. And he was angry with himself for having been so stupid. He had strolled into a trap without a care or a thought. What exasperated him most was the memory of his initial warm liking for the Frenchman.

Presently, however, the growing torment of the beating began to intrude upon his anger. His outraged body was warning him with pain that was more and more intense of the threat to its physical integrity. The warning served no purpose other than to cause him suffering, for he could make no move. For a time this pain filled his being as lightning suffuses a room, flooding every recess while continuing to press inward from without, inexhaustibly. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, the searing flame of the lightning began to pale, the source of its intensity to seem to be drawing away. But he realized suddenly it was not the pain that was abating or withdrawing. It was he who was retreating from the pain. His consciousness, his mind, that inner spark which was essentially himself, was seeking refuge deeper and deeper within him. The blows were falling only upon the outer walls. He was hiding behind the protection of his own flesh.

Tallee turned him over with his foot and began to strike him across the chest and belly. Blood trickled into his mouth and Matt was surprised by the saltiness of the taste. The sense of having escaped into some inner sanctuary became more and more definite. The thought crossed his mind, idly, that dying might be something like this, that this might, in fact, be death.

Sometime later, a very long time later, it seemed, Matt felt himself moving hesitantly outward toward consciousness of the physical outer shell that was his body. This sensation was repeated again and again. Each time he was rebuffed by the wave of strident pain and slipped back thankfully into the comfort of that inner oblivion.

It was midafternoon when he came out of it far enough to realize that he was lying on a clean blanket and that somebody was rubbing him with bear's oil. It did not seem sur-

prising that it was William Clark who was doing the rubbing. The young captain had been so often and so much on his mind that it seemed only natural that he should be here in this crisis. Clark was taking his pulse now. Drouillard and several others were standing around, but it was to the young Frenchman, crouched there beside him, that Clark was giving instructions.

"His pulse is regular. I can't find any bones broken—though no doubt some of his ribs are. He'll feel mighty bad for a few weeks, but he'll likely pull through. Keep him well greased. We'll leave you plenty to eat. When he's able to move take him down to St. Louis. Tell him how sorry we were to lose him. Tell him we had counted on him. But we can't wait. And for his own sake as well as ours we can't drag him along with us. Tell him that." Matt could hear the words, but the meaning eluded him. He continued to feel drowsily content that Clark was making all decisions and taking charge of everything. Clark tore a page from his notebook. "Here's an order on Captain Stoddard at St. Louis to pay him sixty days' wages and to take care of whatever expense you're put to. I've explained to Captain Stoddard that while the boy was never officially on our rolls, we feel we've lost one of our best men."

An hour later something began to ring in Matt like a hammer pounding on an anvil. Belatedly, the meaning of Clark's words came over him and drove him into full consciousness. He sat upright, the anguish of his spirit overriding all pain the movement cost him. One eye was swollen shut, but the other saw all too clearly the Missouri stretching away to the northwest.

The sun was bright on the white sail of the keelboat and the accompanying blue pirogue, and on the red pirogue hastening to catch up after waiting for Clark. The three craft drew together, diminutive in the distance, paddles and oars glittering in the sunlight, and passed around a bend, out of Matt's sight.

The captains were going on, against the surge of the

Missouri, past the long sandbars on which deer danced in the moonlight, across the endless plains where the buffalo darkened the surface of the earth, past strange nations no man had ever visited, to, and perhaps beyond, the Shining Mountains. But he, Matt Morgan, had been left behind.

His torment was the greater because he had been left through no fault or failure of his own. Nothing he had done or left undone had brought this upon him. It had been a meaningless wilderness accident, a ridiculous escapade undertaken by another and with which he had had no conceivable connection, that had cost him so much.

He turned to stare at Bap, still unable to grasp the full extent of his misfortune. Bap was not looking after the expedition. He seemed already to have forgotten it. He was regarding Matt fondly and protectively. Instead of seeming decently aware of the disaster he had caused, he seemed strangely pleased with the situation. He kept studying Matt with a contented grin. There was no escaping the evidence of unconcealed affection on that expressive face. He was happy, God help him, merely because he conceived that he had made a friend.

Matt lifted his hand and struck Bap across the face. Bap continued to grin. He reached around and picked up Tallee's bloodstained club. Taking Matt's hand, he pressed the fingers around the handle of the club and bowed his head.

"Hit Bap," he invited. "Maybe you feel better."

Matt tried to strike, but his strength failed him and the club slipped from his grasp. Bap wagged his head indulgently.

"Soon you will be strong," he forecast consolingly. "Then you pound Bap good. Many the time you want."

Matt groaned and lay back on the blanket. Everything was denied him, even the privilege of sufficiently hating this foolish Frenchman.

A week passed, more slowly than Matt had believed time could pass. His condition ranged from unbearable discomfort to outright agony. There was no position he could as-

sume in which his weight was not a torment. Bap hovered over him in constant and sympathetic attendance, coaxing him to eat, renewing the applications of bear's oil, bandaging his worst wounds with cloths from a bale of trade handkerchiefs left by Clark, singing to him in the night when he could not sleep. He was not in the least affected by Matt's morose ingratitude. He was perpetually grinning and often laughing, clinging, apparently, to his absurd assumption that the whole episode was a happy adventure because it had brought them together and made them friends. Each day he professed to note a vast improvement in Matt's condition.

"Tomorrow," he kept saying, "you be so strong to give Bap beating number one."

Bap strayed from Matt's side only to keep a lookout up the river. It appeared he expected his Uncle Hipolite to return downriver any day after a winter's trading among the Oto near the mouth of the Platte. When he had stolen Tallie's wife Bap had planned to hide in the river-bottom rushes until he could intercept Hipolite and accompany him to St. Charles. It was a feature of this vast and trackless country in which men could be as lost to view as ants in a stubble field that nevertheless those who traveled on the river were bound sooner or later to encounter one another.

Hipolite appeared late in the evening of the eighth day, his *cajou* sweeping into sight around the same bend beyond which the expedition had disappeared.

"Good hunt," observed Bap, noting even at the distance the weight of Hipolite's cargo. The *cajou*, a craft consisting of a cargo-carrying platform fastened between two canoes so as to form a kind of raft, was capable of bearing a surprising burden downstream.

They were now confronted with the task of getting Matt down the cliffs to the river's edge in time to hail the voyager. Bap begged him to wait until he could bring his uncle to help carry him down. But Matt was well acquainted with the tor-

ment of being touched and chose to descend by his own efforts.

He had not foreseen how weak he had become or how stiff and sore and swollen were all his muscles. His first fall brought on a paroxysm of assorted pains under which he nearly fainted. In the darkening dusk it was difficult to see and his falls became more frequent. He struck away Bap's helping hands fiercely and kept on downward.

Despite their haste and all Matt's pain and effort, their progress was too slow. Hipolite was threatening to pass before they could reach the bank to intercept him. Having chosen the channel beyond Stone Island, he was too far away to hear their cries.

In this crisis Bap's wit came to the rescue. They had come upon a great hollow cottonwood. Bap stuffed dry weeds and brush into the hollow base of the tree and lighted it. In a moment the draft in the tall natural chimney drew the fire upward with a sudden terrifying roar and flames shot from the crown of the tree a hundred feet above. Matt looked at the tremendous torch with the first faint interest he had taken in anything for a week.

"Will he know what that means?" he asked.

Bap shook his head and remained complacent. "He will hide and watch. Uncle Hipolite is toujours scare."

To Matt, a man whose occupation was to venture alone up and down this wild river and to spend months among savages could hardly be accused of excessive timidity. Evidently Bap knew his uncle, however. The *cajou* disappeared behind Stone Island and did not reappear below the lower point. Startled by the sudden flare of the signal tree, Hipolite had gone into hiding. And even when they had scrambled out on the bank at the foot of the cliffs no amount of yelling and pleading on Bap's part brought any reply from the island. Uncle Hipolite was clearly one governed by caution.

Bap's appeals became more impatient and violent and

after a time were interspersed with furious imprecations. Matt had no need to understand the French to comprehend that Bap's comments on his uncle's character were increasingly derogatory. The island remained silent. Bap frothed with rage.

Matt felt nothing more than a bitter indifference. Bap's frustration, Uncle Hipolite's cowardice, his own plight and even his own fate, seemed to him equally ludicrous and meaningless.

In his fury Bap snatched up Matt's rifle and fired at the island. This achieved no result except a lonely echo among the cliffs. Bap fell into a moment's silence, broken only by his deep breathing.

"I die," he announced, "if first I kill him."

He kicked around among the driftwood piled on the bank until he had found a piece of a size to support him. Then, though he could not swim, he launched himself into the river. Threshing wildly with the undirected energy of an animal in its death throes, he fought his way across the current until he stranded on the shoal tapering below the lower point of the island and waded ashore to ferret out his uncle's hiding place. Presently Matt could hear grunts of alarm and remonstrance and new shouts of rage. Worn-out with toil and pain, Matt lay at the river's edge with his feet in the water, hoping that nothing would happen to require him ever to move again and conscious of little beyond the small comfort of the mud, moist and cool against his fevered flesh.

At length silence fell over Stone Island. The next sound was the faint splash of paddles. Bap had conquered. The ungainly outline of the *cajou* loomed in the darkness.

Uncle Hipolite turned out to be a giant of a man, thick-shouldered, granite-browed, with a forked black beard extending to his waist, not at all a figure to suffer domination by either caution or nephew. But it was clear that the soul of a warrior did not dwell within that formidable body. When he understood the nature of Matt's injuries and some-



thing of the occurrence that had occasioned them, he began at once to dread the momentary return of the Indians. Despite Matt's and Bap's protests and the extreme danger of night navigation to his valuable cargo, he insisted on proceeding on downriver at once. He caught Matt up, tossed him into the nearest of the twin canoes, and pushed off.

Cramped by the close quarters of the narrow craft, tormented by the rigidity of the struts and ribs, Matt descended into the final depths of pain and misery. Yet he was more oppressed by his spiritual than by his physical suffering. His retreat had now actually commenced. His brave venture toward the Shining Mountains had ended, so soon, and so ignominiously.

Toward morning he must have dozed. When he opened his eyes again the cool clear light immediately preceding sunrise lay over the river. The *cajou* was rocking gently in a backwater. Bap and Hipolite, their differences of the night forgotten, were eagerly opening and examining the cargo of furs so that their value might be displayed and estimated. Hipolite was attempting to conceal his pride and elation beneath a show of dignified calm but Bap was openly impressed and congratulatory. Evidently Hipolite's winter trading had been a pronounced success.

Noticing Matt's open eyes, Bap addressed him excitedly. "Oncle Hipolite he do very good for himself," he boasted. He gestured toward the partly opened packs. "Maybe nine hundred dollar."

Matt felt a faint stir of interest. He had known vaguely that for years a handful of Spanish and French had traded and trapped along the lower Missouri just as the English had along the upper Mississippi around Prairie du Chien. But the idea that there was a personal and practical profit to be gained by ascending the river with which his imagination had been so completely infatuated had not actually occurred to him.

Bap saw Matt's interest and was instantly eager to hold his attention. He held up a skin. "Prime beaver."

Matt raised his head to look and grunted with the pain the effort cost him. "Where'd he get it?" he asked.

"Hipolite winter with the Oto. That is by the River Platte."

"Is that far?"

"Maybe six seven hundred mile."

Matt's interest grew. Even this timid fool Hipolite had gone hundreds of miles farther than he had managed to get. "That's fairly far," he admitted grudgingly.

"Yes—it is far. The year before last Bap he was at the Platte. Bap was *engagé* with Manuel Lisa." There was some understandable complacency in Bap's voice. It had been a service of distinction to be hired by the great Lisa, boldest and most energetic of all the Missouri traders.

Hipolite, unable to understand the conversation and eager to recapture the center of attention, began holding up other selected pelts for Matt's examination and approval.

"Did he trap all of them in one winter?" asked Matt.

"Not trap," explained Bap. "Hipolite he trade. Blanket, kettle, fusil, powder, shot. Oto trap. Hipolite buy."

The great new idea was forming in Matt's mind like the swift gathering of a summer storm. It exploded in a flash as penetrating as had been his sudden inspiration in the woodlot. He sat up, for the moment forgetting all his aches and pains.

"How far up the river has any trader ever been?"

Bap thought. "Toussaint Charbonneau—the cousin of my grand'mère—he has been with the Mandan three time."

"How far is that?"

Bap thought again. "Two three time more far than the Platte."

"What is beyond the Mandan?"

Bap shrugged. "Who knows?"

Matt's great new idea had become a settled decision. He had wasted his opportunity to go with the captains, but here was a way to go on by himself. "A man with trade goods

could keep on going," he declared, his voice rising as if his opinion were being disputed. "The farther he went, the fewer goods he'd find the Indians had and the farther he could go on whatever he had left."

Bap was excited, not by Matt's theory but by Matt's excitement. He leaped from the platform to the sandbar and knelt by the gunwales of the canoe, peering eagerly into Matt's face.

"You want to go far up?"

Matt shook his head. It was no longer a question of what he wanted. "That is what I am going to do," he said.

It was a moment that might shape both their lives, but Bap accepted it with no more thought than if it were a challenge to a game of billiards. "Good. Bap knows. Bap will show you. He will take you to Manuel Lisa. When you are strong we will be *engagés* with him.

"No." Matt was as definite as if he had been thinking about the matter for weeks. He had had enough of depending on other men's expeditions. The next would be his own. "I don't intend to hire out to anybody. I want to start when I'm ready and take whatever way I like. I don't want to be tied to anything or anybody." He continued slowly, thinking aloud, quite forgetting Bap. "I'll find something to do and work until I can buy my own outfit."

Bap nodded eagerly. "What you think," he agreed, "that is what Bap will do."

## CHAPTER VIII

MATT braced his feet against the wall at the foot of the bed, dug his elbows into the mattress, and experimentally shifted his weight. This morning, before anyone in St. Charles was up to observe his halting gait and grimaces of pain, he had crept out and contrived to walk along the street as far as the house of François Papin. The effort

had been a triumph, giving new evidence of his hastening recovery. But he was paying for it now with a fresh set of throbbing aches.

The room was heavy with midsummer heat and the atmosphere was made the more stifling by the regular congregation of afternoon visitors squatting on the floor, leaning against the wall, and sitting in the windows. His bedside had become a daily meeting place for the men of St. Charles, rivaling Pierre Querrel's inn as the village forum. From the moment Bap had carried him up the bank from the landing he had been an object of intense interest, and this interest had mounted enormously when it became known that the picturesquely wounded stranger wished to be informed about the intricacies of the fur trade. This was the one subject on which every inhabitant considered himself an expert, and there was a general rush to enlighten the invalid.

From the first his education had been confused, however, by differences of opinion among his informants, the fur trade being a process so varied that no two had had like experience with it. Daily his eager preceptors had fallen to arguing among themselves, as they were doing now, so that he had found himself less often the attentive novice than the judge to whom disputes were appealed.

Slowly Matt worked his hand up past his shoulder to adjust his pillow. Ursule, Bap's aunt, lingering near the doorway as usual to note his needs, darted across the crowded room to help him.

When they had arrived, Bap, an orphan, had been confronted by his several aunts, each insisting that her house shelter the interesting stranger. The matter had been settled by seniority, the sickbed being moved at the end of each week to the house of the next younger until by now Matt had been turned over to the care of the youngest aunt, who was not so many years older than Bap himself. Matt wished Bap had had but the one female relative, for he much preferred Ursule to the others. She fussed over him less, and there was a fine, life-giving health and vigor about

her mere presence. When she raised him to arrange the pillows he caught the agreeably clean and fruitful smell of starched linen, of wine, of freshly baked bread, and, from her firm bare arms, the smell of her skin moist in the heat, not unpleasant but healthy, like the skin of an apple.

He watched Ursule until she had left the room before turning his attention fretfully back to the others. They were all talking at once and he was able to catch no more than a word here and there. But even without fully understanding the language he knew what they were saying. Fur-trade talk was mainly of boats, for the weight of cargoes carried to and from the Indian country confined all transport to waterways—in this region to the Missouri and its principal tributaries.

There was Gabriel Primeau in the window, a master steersman, much sought after even by such great fur traders as Pierre Chouteau or Manuel Lisa, who took to the river in the lordly keelboat, liner of the fur fleet, sixty or seventy feet in length, shaped and fashioned like a true ship with keel, deck, mast, and cabin, requiring a crew of twenty to forty men and propelled upstream by their united efforts with oars and poles and towline, assisted when there was a favorable wind by sail. There were Charles Neissel and Honoré Adehemar, striving as usual to shout one another down, partners since the marriage of their respective son and daughter, who traded each winter with the Osage, carrying their goods in a pirogue, the big wooden dugout, manned by a crew of six hired among their neighbors. There was Hipolite Alain, who traveled alone in a bark canoe, his stock of goods hardly more extensive than might be carried in the pack of an itinerant peddler. And there was the vast majority who had never been independent traders but were doomed to be perpetual *engagés*, laboring for others as boatmen at a trifling wage.

Matt tired of their gabble. He needed to think and they distracted him. He closed his eyes and snored gently. When this was noticed they nudged one another into silence,

smiled and nodded their pleasure that he was able to rest, and tiptoed out.

He lay with closed eyes, thinking, grappling with the decision he must make. He was only nineteen, but he felt as if his life were rushing past, that opportunity was escaping him, that if he did not soon seize what he wanted it would thereafter be too late ever to grasp it. He sat up impatiently and called to Ursule.

She paused in the doorway, coming no nearer now that he was alone in the room, for her husband, René, crippled since the day a sycamore falling with a caving bank had crushed him with his pirogue, was bitterly jealous of his vital wife's every gesture.

"Send for Bap," he demanded.

Bap came in, beaming with enthusiasm. "The Grand'mère Bailly she is too old to sleep. She have seen you this morning. You walk far. You are soon well."

"I'll soon be well enough to go to work," said Matt grimly. "Sit down there. Now pay attention."

Bap regarded Matt's nervous excitement with growing alarm. "The fever she will come back," he warned.

"Sit down and see if you can answer my questions," persisted Matt. Bap uneasily took the stool by the bedside. "Now—how much did Hipolite have to pay for the outfit he took to the Oto last time?"

Bap squirmed like a schoolboy called up in front of the class. He scowled thoughtfully and began counting on his fingers. "The fusil she was borrow from the Widow Picotte, his capote she is from his cousin Jacques Papin, his canoe he make for himself——"

"I mean his investment—his stock of trade goods. How much did he have to pay for that? Just approximately, of course—I mean, make a guess somewhere near."

Bap pursed his lips and stared at the ceiling. "Maybe one hundred dollar," he decided.

"Now take Neissel and Adehemar—the partners with the pirogue. How much for what they go up with?"

Bap's native intelligence was quick enough once he caught the drift of the interrogation. "Maybe eight or nine hundred dollar," he estimated.

It was Matt's turn to study the ceiling. "The least we'd have to have, then, to make any sort of a go of it for ourselves, is six hundred dollars." He looked at Bap. "You've been around St. Charles all your life. How'd you go about it if you had to get together six hundred dollars between now and next spring?"

Bap opened his mouth several times without making any sound. "Six hundred dollar she is very much."

"I know it. But I'm asking you because this is your country. Where would a man look in St. Charles for a chance to make that much?"

Bap appeared to give a hopeless problem earnest consideration. "There is one way only," he announced at length.

"What's that?"

"Célestine, the daughter of Pierre Querrel, she have the eyes that look two ways, and she talk so." Bap imitated the speech of the unfortunate impeded by a harelip. "Pierre he is rich. He will cry but he will give the dot of six hundred dollar."

"Fine," said Matt disgustedly. "You marry the innkeeper's daughter and we're in the fur business."

Even in jest the prospect alarmed Bap. "No—no—my friend. For you Bap will die. But for you Bap will not marry Célestine."

The fervor of Bap's affection always made Matt uneasy. Hastily he reverted to his more practical theme. "There must be something a man can do in St. Charles to make money."

Bapp nodded. "Everybody they work in the fur trade." He embraced this sensible recourse with relief. "We will talk to Manuel Lisa. For him we will be *engagés*."

"At thirty cents a day," objected Matt. "That's nonsense. If we saved every penny the two of us would be six seasons getting together anything like six hundred dollars."

Bap shrugged his shoulders. To him it was an insoluble

problem and better dropped. "We want to be the fur trader. If we do that we must first be the fur trader. She is like the hen and the egg. Who come first?"

Matt set up suddenly and threw his legs over the side of the bed. He was angry, which puzzled Bap. Matt was finding that the decision to retreat, for whatever purpose, is never an easy one to make. "Then we'll go back to Kentucky," he said, "where people are civilized enough so that a man can work for money. I can come pretty close to making six hundred dollars there by spring." He stood up, shaking Bap off when he leaped up to support him. "I can't paddle much yet, but I might as well be lying in your canoe as lying in this bed. We can start in another week. That order for two months' wages Captain Clark gave me will pay for the trip."

Bap stared at him in dismay that turned swiftly to rage. He stamped his foot like an infuriated woman and strode to the door. Here he turned and delivered himself of a staccato blast of French, the words coming so fast Matt could make no sense of it other than in some fashion Bap had been outrageously insulted. Before he had finished there were tears in Bap's eyes. Suddenly he turned and ran.

Matt realized the error into which he had fallen. "You damned fool—come back here!" he shouted unavailingly.

His short nightshirt flapping about his thighs, he ran in pursuit. He overtook Bap in the center of the street, where their reconciliation attracted an immediate, deeply interested crowd.

"I didn't mean I was hiring you to take me to Kentucky, you ignorant dummy," he scolded. "I'll never be able to pay you for what you've done for me already. Can't you get it through what passes for your head that I want you to go to Kentucky with me and stay with me until we've got money together to buy us a trading outfit? And it'll serve you right. In Kentucky you'll have to work. You won't like that."

Before Matt could fight him off he was swept into Bap's forgiving embrace.



"Who care for work?" scoffed Bap. "Bap he have show you St. Charles. You will show Bap Kentucky. In Kentucky there are many girls with the yellow hair."

"In Kentucky you'll get yourself shot."

## CHAPTER IX

THEY did not start for Kentucky within the week as Matt had planned. Once their design had been noised about, there were the rigid social demands of the community to be considered first. St. Charles set great store by farewells, and elaborate leavetakings formed an essential feature of village life. Each spring and fall many men set off for the Indian country to engage in the fur trade, often to be gone for two or three years and all too frequently never to return. Each such leavetaking was regarded as a unique event and signaled by a prolonged festival, in which sorrow was celebrated with purposeful gaiety. Departures were invariably delayed for days by repeated farewell visits, barbecues, dances and drunken frolics. The current occasion for celebration was greeted with additional interest because a journey to Kentucky was without precedent.

On the third morning of postponement, when Bap crept in at dawn still bright-eyed and grinning, Matt exacted a promise from him to leave for certain the following day. Since Matt had started to walk his improvement had been rapid and his growing strength added to his impatience.

He dressed, appreciating the fact that this simple operation was no longer a task, and sat on the steps to bask in the early warm sunlight, looking idly up and down the single street along which the houses of the village were strung, each with its whitewashed picket or sapling fence enclosing its little garden and orchard. The murmur of bees and the clucking of hens mingled peacefully with the snores of Antoine Gardepied sleeping it off in the gutter. Matt felt a share in the contentment that brooded over the unawakened

village. This, so far as he had one, had become his home.

This reflection, pleasant at first, became presently oddly disturbing. His plan to engage in the fur trade as a means of implementing his westward journey committed him to literal citizenship in this community, together with its strange and squalid suburbs that were the traders' customary winter quarters in distant Indian towns. He was to become one of these people. And there was no denying they were a simple and childlike people who lived without serious purpose and devoted their time chiefly and assiduously to wasting it.

Matt was distracted from this disturbing reflection by the sight of Hipolite saddling his mule behind his bright new house at the end of the street. Matt strolled down to walk at his stirrup, glad of the excuse to exercise his regained strength and to talk to a man of so much upriver experience.

Hipolite was going out to round up his pigs. The cattle, horses, and pigs of St. Charles were allowed to graze at will in the forests and prairies of the vicinity. When a man had need of his stock, he rode out and searched until he had found his own. Animals were earmarked to distinguish the owner and one of the few enforced statutes on the books of the Spanish regime had been the ruling that no carcass could be sold in St. Louis unless the ears were still attached.

Hipolite welcomed the company and launched into an enthusiastic and detailed estimate of the past festivities. No night had the dancing ceased before dawn. Never had there been a time when husbands and fathers had had greater need to be on guard. Alcoholic antics that had distressed him among the Indians he regarded with boundless amusement when performed by his own people.

But when Matt tried to turn the conversation to Hipolite's experience in the Indian trade he had little success. By noncommittal grunts and abrupt evasions Hipolite indicated that this was one phase of his life he wished only to forget. For twelve dreary and painful years he had struggled up and down the river, broken his back with unremitting and unrewarded labor, pampered ignorant and vicious Indians,

slept with their fat daughters, risked his life daily. Having finally achieved one good season, he had built a house, married the Widow Picotte, and settled down to a contented existence. He intended never to stray from St. Charles. He wanted never again to see an *embarras*, an Oto lodge, or a trade blanket. His fervent desire was never even to talk about it.

They came upon the pigs at the edge of the forest. Freedom naturally had turned them wild and they were suspicious, furtive, and elusive. Startled by the first sight of Hipolite, they scattered, snorting and squealing, darting in and out of cover, making themselves as hard to catch as rabbits in a field of grown corn. One man on horseback, or ten or a hundred for that matter, could have no conceivable hope of driving the pigs out of these woods across the open prairie and down to St. Charles.

But Hipolite proved equal to the occasion. From a sack tied on behind him he produced an ear of corn, which he tossed into an open glade. There was a brief pause before the surrounding hazlenut thickets began to rustle nervously and finally to emit low grunts of considering greed. Suddenly there was a rush into the open as every pig sought to be the first to gain the morsel. While the fight over the first ear of corn was at its noisy height Hipolite walked his mule slowly away and presently dropped another ear. The first pig to see it raced to be the first to reach it while all the others galloped in jealous pursuit. By the time the third ear was dropped Hipolite had the entire herd scrambling at his mule's heels. They would follow him with no concern except appetite all the way to the pen behind his house, where he would sort out those belonging to his neighbors, earmark the young of his own sows, select what he needed to butcher, and turn the rest out to keep themselves until he had need for more ham and bacon.

Matt squatted to rest at the edge of the timber, watching Hipolite's homeward progress. Beyond the town stretched the Missouri and, as usual, his glance traveled up it, fol-

lowing the darker line of the wooded banks as far as his eyes could see. The next time he set out from Kentucky, he promised himself, he would keep on going.

The sound of Bap's voice calling in extreme excitement brought his gaze back from the distance. Bap was running up the slope toward him. By the way he was waving his arms and gesticulating, he considered himself the bearer of important news. Matt rose and went to meet him.

For a time Bap was too breathless to announce his news. He could only grin and roll his eyes and shake Matt's hand. At last he managed to gasp, "The six hundred dollar she have come to us."

"Wait till you get your wind," counseled Matt. "Then try to talk sense."

Bap drew long sobbing gasps, spent his first recovered breath on an exuberant laugh, made a losing effort to embrace Matt, pounded him on the chest to demand his participation in this moment of exultation, and at last panted, "We have not—to go to Kentucky."

Matt had learned not to take Bap's most enthusiastic schemes too seriously. So at first he was less interested than amused. "No? We do not go to Kentucky? Have you forgotten the girls with the yellow hair?"

Bap replied with intense earnestness. "Her hair is not yellow. It is——" He hesitated, at loss for words but determined to explain. "It is not black. It is not red. It is—like the inside of the chestnut in September when you hold it in the sun." He was delighted with the success of this description and rushed on. "She is tall—for a girl—so high." He measured with great care a spot in the air before him a trifle lower than his shoulder. His eyes were fixed on this spot as if he were studying the form he was describing. "She have the form—ah—just so." His expressive hands made fond gestures in the space before him.

"What color are her eyes?" asked Matt dryly.

"Like the sky," Bap replied. Then, looking at the brightness of the sky above, he shook his head. "Blue—yes—but

not so blue." He closed his own eyes in order to remember more exactly the color. "Like the sky—yes—but the sky in the morning—just before the sun she come up." He opened his eyes to discover that Matt had seated himself on the ground. "But you have to walk too far. You have tire."

"No, I'm not tired. I'm just listening."

Bap's face darkened with indignation as he began to realize that Matt was so far from sharing his ecstatic mood. "Then you have hear," he pronounced. "Everything she have been told."

"Didn't I hear you say something about six hundred dollars—before you got off the track on this girl you've been dreaming about?"

"The track she is the same," said Bap, turning away. "The girl she is not the dream. She is here—at the inn of Pierre Querrel. And she have the six hundred dollar."

This brought Matt very quickly to his feet. He seized Bap's arm and pulled him around. "I've been listening. It seems like a very interesting story. But so far I've missed the point. Tell me again. Start from the beginning."

Bap was mollified by Matt's belated interest. His own excitement returned, though now he made a severe effort to control it. "She have come to St. Charles with her father. They have the land—four mile downriver. They have the wish to build the house. They look for the carpenter and the man who build with stone—who do you call him—the mason. In St. Charles they have not the men who build. The girl and her father they are at the bateau to go away when Bap he come."

"And took one look at the girl and told them you were carpenter, mason, and engineer all in one?"

"For her—maybe so." Bap sobered. "No. Bap he is more smart. Bap tell her his friend is the grand carpenter—the fine mason."

"What made you think I can build a house?"

Bap gave Matt a shrewd look. "For six hundred dollar you will build it."

"You're right," Matt admitted. "Let's go catch them before they start for their bateau again."

All the way down the slope Matt kept reassuring himself that Bap's proposal represented a sensible scheme, presuming these people had the money. It would save the trip to Kentucky and the possible loss of time involved. He could be sure now of starting his journey upriver in the spring. He did not doubt his ability to build a frontier house. He had often assisted in the construction of houses and barns, working in stone as well as wood. There seemed no rational occasion to hesitate. Yet a feeling of uneasiness grew upon him, so that it was with no astonishment, but rather as if it were something he must unconsciously have been expecting to happen, that he saw who was waiting at the inn.

Seated at the table under the great locust in the side garden was Daniel Austin, and standing near the gate, looking off over the river, was Nora. Austin looked more than ever the distinguished gentleman. His new broadcloth suit indicated that the St. Louis legacy must have amounted to something, after all. But, in odd contrast, Nora's gown and bonnet, though neat and very clean, were worn and of a fashion even Matt could recognize as long out of date. In the midst of his uneasiness, which now had mounted to a curiously disturbing degree of excitement, Matt was briefly puzzled and irritated that there seemed to be money to spend on outfitting the head of the family but none for the daughter.

He caught sight of Nora's face before she had seen him. She seemed taut with a kind of expectancy, almost of fear, as if awaiting something she wanted yet dreaded.

"Oho!" cried Bap. "Here is my friend who will build you the house."

She turned, startled. "Matt!" she gasped.

Then, realizing that he was actually there in person, her face merely lighted up with the natural pleased surprise of

one unexpectedly meeting an old friend. But her expression changed once more as he pushed open the gate and came closer.

"But you are so thin and pale," she exclaimed.

"Only a little accident," he said. "It was nothing."

Austin came running forward in delighted astonishment. "Well—well—well—Mr. Morgan. But this is wonderful. To our rescue again, eh?" He shook Matt's hand effusively, then turned suddenly on Nora with a frank, teasing impeachment that was most shocking to Matt. "Ah ha, you sly minx! So this is why you were so set on looking for carpenters in St. Charles?"

Nora said easily: "If I'd known, I'd have come sooner. But the truth is I thought he'd planned on being a thousand miles away with Lewis and Clark."

"Monsieur Querrel," Austin called to Pierre peering curiously from the inn doorway, "Another bottle, if you please." He turned back happily to his guests. "Come, let us not delay drinking to our mutual good fortune in this reunion."

He took Nora's arm and led the way toward the table. Bap seized Matt's wrist, holding him back.

"For why have you hide this from me?" whispered Bap.

"Hide what from you?"

"For why have you not tell me you have know her—that she is for you?"

"Don't be a fool." Matt was alarmed lest Bap's hoarse whispering be overheard. "Why, I've only seen her once before in my life."

Bap stepped back, still holding him while he stared into his face. "Ah!" he sighed. "Maybe the fool she is you." He turned to look after Nora. The pulse in his temple was beating visibly. His face became flushed and his eyes very bright. "That is good. Then she can be for Bap."

Matt shook Bap off and strode on. It was ridiculous that Bap, who had known so many women, could have persuaded himself he was already in love with this one. And

his shameless Latin readiness to exhibit his emotion made Matt ashamed for him, and for himself as well because he had been the witness to it.

As Matt approached the table he looked at Nora; it seemed to him less awkward to look at her than self-consciously to look away from her. He could not help noticing that Bap had reported well. Her hair was neither red nor black but did indeed have the sheen of a chestnut where the sun touched it at the edge of the demure poke bonnet. And the blue-gray of her eyes were very like the luminous early morning sky. Matt caught himself, thought hastily of his only business here, and turned abruptly to Austin.

"I should tell you right off that I am not a carpenter by trade—or a stonemason either."

"No good talking business with me," said Austin. He pointed to Nora. "There's the boss. She'll be your task-master. You must understand I'm no longer the head of my family." Though disavowing responsibility, he continued his explanation with amused eagerness, obviously less intent upon informing Matt than upon making another attempt at teasing Nora. "Mr. Morgan, you see in me a mere dependent upon the largess of his women. My sainted sister arranged it so. To me, of course, she most generously left her late husband's mercantile business and a thousand-acre tract of land on this bank of the river. But the business has more debts on the books than goods on the shelves and the title to the land is a Spanish grant yet to be recognized by the American courts. On the other hand, to my wife she left the St. Louis house, so that I have a roof over my head only by the sufferance of my spouse. And to Nora, for her dot, she left her jewelry and personal effects. Does Nora value these sentimental treasures? You cannot believe with what haste she sold every last trinket.

"Thus you comprehend my situation. There is not a penny in the family aside from the money hoarded in Nora's reticule. I should warn you now, Mr. Morgan, this lovely young creature is a miser. She will buy nothing—even for



herself. Look at her. That gown was discarded by her mother ten years ago. And she finds living in St. Louis too expensive. St. Louis is surely as simple and backward a small settlement as one could find in the West but to Nora it is an extravagant metropolis. Controlling the purse, she rules that we must move to this wilderness bank. So the miser's hoard is to be released for the construction of a cabin in the woods." He broke off laughing.

"The time will come when you will thank me, Daniel," said Nora. "You know you're no sort of a merchant and your business will fail within the year. But if we improve this land, the American court will recognize your title and we'll have a place to live."

"Ah, and that she is very good land!" cried Bap. "Along all the river they do not find land so good." His eager glance sought Nora's. "And you will be close—St. Charles will see you many the time."

Nora smiled pleasantly at Bap, apparently unperturbed by his unconcealed admiration. "I do hope St. Charles will welcome us as neighbors."

"Welcome," scoffed Bap. "Welcome—she is a word so little."

"I can't speak for myself," said Austin, reaching out across the table to pat Nora's hand, "but I have noticed wherever we go a rather general tendency to welcome my wife and daughter."

Pierre Querrel, smirking and bowing, his little eyes darting with intense curiosity from face to face among his guests, finished pouring the wine and backed away, reluctantly.

Matt relaxed, his first desperate uneasiness passing. While these people chattered on he was able to think, quite clearly. His unschooled instinct had not misled him that day he had fled from the Shawnee camp. Here before his eyes was new and living evidence—evidence even more striking than the glimpse of a wife's arms wound around a husband's neck. Nora was able to exert this same woman's

power to hold, only with her the power was more ominous because it was, so far, so much more elusive. Sitting here listening and observing, as an unthreatened bystander, he was able to contemplate the predicament in which these two other men were entangled. Neither seemed moved by any other wish than to please this smiling, sweet-faced girl. Matt recalled with what passion she had declared: "I want to find a place and stay there—and stay there and stay there." If they were so bent on pleasing her, then they too would be obliged henceforth to stay there. The indulgent Austin had already submitted; he would live where and how his daughter chose. And if his infatuation persisted, Bap's heedless wanderings would come to an end as definitely as a calf's run is brought up at the end of his tie rope. Matt felt a glow of satisfaction to know himself thus aware, as his blind companions were not, of the situation into which they were drifting, and to realize that he was safe because he was aware.

Austin tasted the wine and beamed. "Ah—very good! Good enough to drink to this occasion. Gentlemen—Nora—to the kind fortune that brought us together today!"

Bap offered a quick amendment to the toast. "Bap he give the salute to what come—maybe long—maybe soon—but for sure," he announced, lifting his glass.

In Nora's eyes there was a faraway look. "I think I would like to drink to the new house," she said.

"But we must all drink to the same thing," demonstrated Austin. "Shall we make it then—to what each wants most?"

Nora looked directly at Matt for the first time since they had reached the table. "Surely even you can drink to that, Matt?"

There seemed no more than a gentle raillery in her smiling glance. But Matt's new-found assurance fell apart. The chilling thought came to him that it might not have been chance that had led her search for a builder to St. Charles. The story of Tallee's club must surely have spread to St. Louis. She could well have heard that he was here instead

of far away with the expedition. Having discovered how rare were capable workmen on this frontier, she might have come here with the intention of enlisting his service. The possibility left him little enough reason to feel superior to Bap and Austin. At the moment both were looking at him and laughing. He felt something of the futile anger of a child who suspects that he may be the occasion for the laughter of an adult company.

"I most certainly can," he replied, "What I want most is six hundred dollars."

Nora set down her glass slowly. But she did not look away from him. "Then let us be businesslike," she said gravely. "We have eight hundred dollars to be invested in the house. We will deposit it with Pierre Chouteau to be drawn upon as it is needed. We were told in St. Louis that tools, glass for windows, ironwork, and things like that should not run to more than two hundred. The timber and stone are at the site for the cutting. So the greatest cost will be for labor. It seems like a job that might earn six hundred dollars for the builder, don't you think?"

Nora's matter-of-fact statement left Matt feeling foolish, as he had been made to feel by the manner of her saying good-by beside the Shawnee cabin. Austin and Bap were regarding him with puzzled and critical frowns. There could be nothing rational in his continued hesitation. Yet he could not bring himself to acquiesce.

"Come," said Nora. "Before you make up your mind you should see the place. I can hardly wait to show it to you."

Austin and Bap gulped their wine, and leaped to their feet as if animated by strings operated by Nora's slightest wish. Matt could hardly decline to visit the site. He could only watch, scowling, while Bap hurried to throw open the gate for Nora's passing, and wait, fuming, while Austin lingered to pay Pierre Querrel. Austin joined him at the gate, slipped an arm companionably through his, and strolled with him toward the river front, his smiling gaze following Nora, walking on ahead with Bap.

"Never knew a girl to take to anything like Nora has to this idea of building a house," he marveled.

"She does seem to know what she wants," said Matt.

His anger persisted and grew. A half-hour ago everything had been simple, well ordered, understood. Even his difficulties had been identified, considered, each tagged, as it were, for handling at the proper time. Now all was confusion. He too was being drawn by strings in the hands of another.

At the landing Nora hesitated, turned suddenly to look solicitously up into Matt's face, and asked penitently, "Are you sure you feel strong enough to take a trip like this today?"

"Certainly I do," he said.

Bap's high spirits were mounting higher with each moment. "Strong enough for one little boat ride? He is so strong he plan to go tomorrow to Kentucky in the canoe."

Nora still hesitated but Bap jumped down into the boat, seized her by the elbows, swung her down beside him, and conducted her masterfully forward, leaving to Matt and Austin the place in the stern.

"You friend is very gallant," murmured Austin.

"He's had a good deal of practice," Matt said.

The four black boatmen manning Austin's hired bateau pushed the craft out into the stream and caught the water with their oars. Over their swaying shoulders and bobbing heads Matt could gain intermittent glimpses of Bap and Nora in the bow. The sudden intent interest with which Bap approached a girl created the impression that no thought not connected with the pleasure of her company could conceivably occur to him. This undivided attention was now devoted to Nora. Never did his smiling glance stray away from her face. Her own attention seemed often on the distance ahead, as if straining to catch the first glimpse of her wild estate, but from time to time she turned to laugh with Bap. Their brief acquaintance seemed to have ripened amazingly.

"He's really not quite the sort of fellow she's likely to be interested in for long," said Austin.

Matt turned to discover the other's amused regard. He pretended to misunderstand. "Who? Oh, you mean Bap. I hadn't noticed. But think nothing of it. He acts like that with every girl he meets."

The guilty care he was taking to conceal from Austin the nature of his feeling betrayed him before the bar of his own judgment. The anger that possessed him was no longer a general vague resentment. He was jealous. He could have been no more perturbed had he discovered, with as little warning, his foot in a bear trap.

So much confusion had been caused by one hour of her company. There was no foreseeing how much more would arise during the months it would require to build her house. The least damage was likely to be the loss of his partner. He must find some pretext, if necessary the slightest, upon which to base a refusal of the whole undertaking. He must get Bap, get away, and stay away.

The bateau was landed where a game trail broke through to the water's edge. With Nora eagerly leading the way, they walked among the great trees of the forest that covered the bottom land along the river. Matt, his mind eased by decision, found additional reassurance in noting the familiar natural features of forest life. He saw the file of turkeys striding swiftly away beyond the cedar copse. He saw that the fur of the doe bounding startled from her midday doze was turning to the blue of late summer and that her fawn was losing his spots. And then he saw the excitement growing on Nora's face.

She led them up the course of a little stream that cascaded, sparkling, from the crest of the bluff above, until at length the game track she was following came out on the open prairie that extended across the plateau overlooking the Missouri. Here, waist-deep in the lush, ripened grass, she drew a long breath of pure elation and, turning toward him, threw out her hands in a gesture that said "Behold!"

Matt had no need to look with her eyes to understand the pride and joy of possession that inspired her. Never had he seen better land more beautifully situated. The rich prairie rolled gently away to the edge of the forest, the carpet of waving grass parting to frame the clear blue gleam of three little lakes. The stream meandered pleasantly across the meadows before plunging over the escarpment to disappear in the great forest that filled the Missouri bottom below. Far to the north rose the cliffs lining the Illinois bank of the Mississippi. Nora's site was doubly blessed. It offered the gracious fertility of valley land and at the same time the spacious free outlook of a hilltop.

Bap nudged Matt violently. "You think maybe you will not build her house," whispered Bap hoarsely. It was not a question. It was a denunciation.

"Keep quiet and let me handle this," growled Matt.

Bap stared. "Your head—that Tallee he pound on it too hard."

"It isn't my head that's soft," insisted Matt. "I can see what we'd be getting into."

"So—you think maybe you will not build her house," Bap repeated.

"Wait until we can talk it over," urged Matt impatiently.

Bap's eyes glittered. He was like a man possessed. "Then Bap he will build her alone."

Matt was angry now, too. "You couldn't build a hen coop alone."

"For her Bap could build the government house in St. Louis."

Nora set her foot. "Here is where I want to build," she said. The elation of her spirit was voiced, however, in words strangely practical and prosaic. "There's wood, and water, and land already cleared and ready for the plow." She indicated the pool in a curve of the stream. "The duck pond, for example, can be there. And the springhouse set in that bank. The main house will face south over the river. It can be of logs except for the kitchen, which must be built

of stone—with a fireplace cutting it in two so that the half behind the fireplace can be a storehouse."

She was looking about her with swift vivid glances, visualizing her home-to-be as clearly as if it already existed. Matt tried to look away but he could not. She had swept off her bonnet and it dangled at the end of its strings as she made quick eager gestures. The wind stirred softly in her hair and pressed the faded homespun gown against the curves of breast and thigh. Her face glowed with that expression of startling beauty he remembered at the candlebird tree.

People who knew so well what they wanted deserved to gain it. She wanted this so much that it was only right that she should have it. And it was not right for him to withhold his aid.

His yielding was not a surrender. He was only taking up a new position. He would build her house this winter. And in the spring he would go. Having given her what she wanted most, he would then be free to go.

## CHAPTER X

**S**PRING, long delayed, came like the sun breaking suddenly through a cloud. One day the Missouri was choked with ice and the next it had risen with a mighty surge to free its channel. The morning Matt awoke to hear the shrill piping of the season's first frog, he found the spice-wood in bud, the cottonwood in tassel, and the first sprigs of the new grass casting a glint of green across southern slopes. Immense flocks of swan and geese soared aloft to continue their stupendous northward journey; unending swarms of ducks, and brant, and cranes glided out of the south to settle on the lakes and river; sedate files of pelicans and noisy swirls of gulls dropped to rest on sand-bars. The long-frozen forest and pond and marsh stirred with the new life of trickling water, of running feet, of beat-

ing wings, with a glad pervasive murmur of twittering, and chattering, and splashing, and honking; even the howl of wolves at night sounded a note of greeting. To Matt the winter had seemed too short to do all he had set himself to do, but now his work was finished and he welcomed the release of spring.

To Nora, in St. Louis, the spring likewise came with a sudden exultant rush. One night a thunderstorm beat the icicles from the roof and the next morning warm and golden sunlight flooded in at the windows. One day violets and cowslips appeared in the corner of the garden, the next the peach and cherry trees in the yard bloomed, and the third Frank and Luther burst through the front door to run, screaming like wild Indians, into Nora's arms.

Austin had brought them with him on his return from Kentucky. There were other items in his cargo that pleased Nora almost as much as the inclusion of the two boys. The barge was loaded with furnishings for the new house on the Missouri, a saddle horse for himself, two milch cows, a litter of pigs, all bought with the proceeds of the sale of half his mercantile establishment to a partner Austin had found in Louisville, one Timothy Breen. Breen was an experienced storekeeper, Austin explained easily, and this would permit him to devote more of his own time to the development of the land. He saw himself as one by nature better fitted for the role of country gentleman than that of town tradesman. Nora had no concern for his motives. She was overjoyed that his genteel inclination coincided with her desire to have her family once more gathered about her and at last a home in which to hold them about her.

In sudden new excitement it was decided that instead of unloading the barge in St. Louis they would go aboard and proceed at once to take possession of this new home. To Austin the land on the Missouri had already become an estate. He had even hit upon a name for it. All proper estates had names. He proposed to call it Riverhill. Nora smiled but made no objection. The property was his and



he was nominally the head of the family. And she welcomed anything that added to his interest in it. Her own conception of what awaited them was something more primitive and yet more substantial. She wanted a sturdy roof over four walls to provide shelter for the family and, by the door, land to grow enough to feed them. She wanted practical security for her children, among whom she counted Lydia the dearest, because she was the one most in need of protection.

The winter had been long and tedious and yet suffused with a glow of happiness. Her every waking thought was of the house that was building and the builder who was at work upon it. The fact that distance and weather and circumstances made it impossible to visit the scene of his labors even once only made her appreciate the more intensely the service he was rendering her. She was gaining what her heart had been set on, and it was this man who was gaining it for her. He was building for her even in her absence. It seemed peculiarly appropriate, almost prophetic that this fulfillment of her great desire should be so entirely his accomplishment. It made the house even more essentially her home.

She had been busy, too. Austin was away and Lydia was in delicate health, requiring Nora's constant attention. She was expecting again, much to Nora's indignation. This in turn, however, accounted for Austin's willingness to leave to get Frank and Luther. Lydia's men seldom wandered far from Lydia's side except when she was pregnant.

The baby, a girl, came with unanticipated ease, and within a week Lydia was on her feet with new color in her cheeks and the old sparkle in her eyes. The surprising health and strength of mother and child seemed to Nora another good omen. When Matt had appeared in the Shawnee camp every threat hanging over them had dissolved. Now when he had once more taken a hand in their affairs, even at a distance, good fortune accompanied him.

With all going so well the chief excitement centered upon selecting a name for the baby. A family tradition had grown

up around the naming of Lydia's children. Since Nora and until this one, each had had a new father and each had been named in honor of his own father's predecessor. Thus Frank, the son of Lydia's second husband, Luther Bassett, had been named for Frank Eliot, Nora's father, and Luther, Mark Andrews' son, had been named for the earlier Luther, while Mark's name had been given Daniel Austin's firstborn. As Nora had told Matt, it was all very confusing, but it did serve to satisfy certain sentimental demands of Lydia's nature. The christening of this girl baby, therefore, posed something of a problem since in so many ways she departed from the family tradition, but Lydia and Nora at length decided to call her Linda, after Belinda, Austin's sister, whose bequest had accounted for Linda's being born in St. Louis.

When Lydia took a man or had a baby Nora shared the experience so deeply and intimately, on account of the impulse to stand guard over Lydia's happiness, that it was next only to her undergoing a trial herself. With the advent of Lydia, Nora for the first time found joy in having a new baby in the house. As she brushed the sparse golden fuzz on Linda's head, put her down, took her up, bathed and changed her, carried her to and from Lydia's bed, Nora often laughed and sang, much to Lydia's smiling astonishment. Nora was attached to her younger brothers, but in each case she had fiercely resented their first appearance. Like Mark, each had arrived at a singularly inopportune moment, with Lydia's affairs in a crisis that the addition to the family made infinitely more critical. All was different with Lydia's arrival. She came into an atmosphere of peace and hope. For her there was awaiting a home.

And now Nora with her entire brood gathered around her was on her way to take possession of the new home. That she had yet to see it made it none the less real. She knew all about it. During the early winter before the river's alternate freezing and thawing had made transit impossible

occasional visitors from St. Charles had brought reports. St. Charles felt a natural interest in the neighboring development on the north bank of the river. This interest had developed into awed astonishment at Matt's unprecedented industry. It was said that not satisfied with working from morning until evening, he often built great fires to keep his mortar from freezing by the light of which he was enabled to continue his labors far into the night. Nora lay awake nights thinking with mingled pleasure and anxiety of Matt doggedly raising the walls in weather so cold that fires were necessary to keep the very stones from freezing. She could not even write to him of her appreciation and gratitude, for the Missouri had by then become so choked with ice that the hardiest voyageur would not venture to cross. But now the ice had broken, the long winter was over, spring had come, and she was on her way home.

The heavily laden barge wallowed ponderously in the mud-colored, foam-flecked waves as the craft swung around into the mouth of the Missouri. The massed first leaves of cottonwood and willow hung like a green mist over the shores. Island and banks were laced with the scarlet of the redbud and interwoven with the snow of wild-plum blossom. A northbound flock of passenger pigeons shadowed the sky above. Nora had eyes for none of these. She strained only to catch the first glimpse of the house on the cliff top. But the current here forced the boatmen to keep the barge close to the north bank, where the overhanging branches blocked her view.

The barge was beached at the foot of the game trail. The strand was marked by the frequent landings of canoes and pirogues from St. Charles and the trail had become a well-beaten path. The wilderness no longer had its former aspect of solitude and even in the thick forest here along the river-bank had taken on the appearance of a place that was inhabited.

Nora sprang ashore and began to run up the path. Frank

and Luther, yelling with excitement, started to follow, but Lydia, with understanding, called them back to help with the baggage. Nora hurried on alone.

She came out at the head of the path where it mounted the rim above the river bottom and paused, breathless, to survey her domain. There before her stood the house, sturdy, severe, angular, almost forbidding. She moved slowly toward it, hardly daring to breathe. It seemed smaller, higher, more compact than she had foreseen in her imagination. It seemed so very square, solid, isolated, like a blockhouse. Then, as she approached, she drew a long breath of relief. It did look so very solid and strong, but it also looked as if it belonged there.

It was of two stories instead of the one she had expected, the lower walls of stone, the upper of hewn logs. With the stonework stained by smoke and the timbers already somewhat weathered by the spring rains, it was saved from the raw un-lived-in air of a new house. It seemed something that not only belonged there but that was firmly founded upon the earth from which it had sprung, that had long been there, and that could be expected to remain there forever. She was close to the door now and suddenly with a low cry of delight she ran forward.

A narrow strip of the dooryard, running across the front of the house, had been paved with flagstones. At once she foresaw the porch roof with slender white columns, the climbing vines, the lilac at the corners. She turned and, feeling herself already shaded by the porch, looked out over the magnificent wide valley below. She seemed to sense Matt's understanding while laying the flagstones. He had not attempted to add the porch. He had not taken everything upon himself. He had laid the foundation but he had left much for her to do.

Nora turned to the door. It was of heavy oak but swung easily on strong wrought-iron hinges. Entering, she began to hurry, too excited to pause for more than swift glances

until she had seen it all. The door opened into the kitchen, that multi-purposed focus of family living in the frontier house—stone-floored and stone-walled with low-beamed ceiling, but with the chill removed by the fires burning in the great fireplaces at either end. A steep narrow stairway, patiently fashioned in the place of the mere ladder that would have served, led to the floor above. Here the space had been partitioned into four rooms. Nora gasped. Except for the brief summer in Austin's brick house she had never lived under a roof that extended over more than two rooms. She raced back down the stairs and threw open the door beside the central fireplace. Here was the storeroom she had demanded as, after the kitchen, the most essential feature of her house. She nodded with satisfaction, beginning to imagine the ranged barrels of apples, the hams and bacons hanging from the rafters, before she saw the steps leading to the cellar below—a root cellar where potatoes and pumpkins and squashes could be stored safe from frost, not against some distant bank but beneath the very floor of the house itself. Little wonder the house had seemed to her at first glance so solid and compact. There was packed within the compass of its walls and roof so much that she wanted.

At the back door there was another strip of flagstone to which Nora's imagination immediately added a lean-to roof to shelter summer kitchen and laundry, and dry wood, before she suddenly dropped to her knees with another gasp of near ecstasy to dip her fingers in the water bubbling strongly over the stone coping of the well. An artesian well at the very kitchen door was undreamed-of luxury. Her eyes followed the water running in the stone conduit from the well into the springhouse, which was also beside the kitchen door, and on past the group of outbuildings that had been hidden from her first glimpse of the main house by the slight rise of ground. There were the smokehouse, the henhouse, the pigpen, and the squat log barn with, beside it, the hollow-log watering trough through which the well water ran

before widening into the duck pond and escaping finally into the stream. Again there was the same air of compactness, with everything gathered close and safe.

Then Nora saw the straight lines of planting that encompassed the farmyard and recognized the cuttings of Osage plum thus set out. The wiry shrubs would grow swiftly into an impenetrable hedge surrounding the little kingdom as a castle is guarded by its moat. She realized then how fully Matt had understood her yearning for security for herself and those dear to her. He had built her a veritable fortress—a place strong against the most elemental threats of weather and want.

She sprang to her feet, suddenly conscious that with all about her these manifestations of his presence, even to the fires burning on the two hearths, she had so far caught no glimpse of him.

"Matt!" she called. "Matt!"

When there was no answer she began running through the farmyard. "Matt!" she cried again and again, her voice breaking with joy and gratitude and presently with the beginning of anxiety.

A gaunt, black-bearded figure finally appeared around the corner of the barn. It was Hipolite Alain, who had been sleeping in the sun. He came forward, stretching and yawning at first, and then, when he had recognized Nora, beaming and bowing. Nora had picked up a working command of French during her winter in St. Louis but Hipolite spoke so rapidly and his speech was so filled with wilderness idiom that it was with difficulty she caught the drift of his address. The gist of his remarks seemed to be that he had been stationed here to guard the premises until her arrival, that this was certainly a magnificent establishment to have been brought into being in so short a time, but that with equal certainty she was a young woman whose appearance and character fully deserved such bounty.

"But where's Matt?" she demanded.

There ensued another voluble outburst of which Nora

presently caught the drift all too clearly. Matt's work here was done. He had gone to St. Louis to purchase the stock of trade goods for his journey upriver this spring.

To Nora her new house was so much the center of the universe that she could not conceive of a rival interest. "He's going up the river?" she gasped. "What for?"

Hipolite smiled philosophically. "That is what I now ask myself. There is one answer only. He is young. When I was young I myself did not have the sense to sit comfortably by the fire."

Unwillingly Nora began to face the truth. He had built the house, but he had built it only for her. She remembered their first talk that morning in the Shawnee cabin. He had spoken clearly enough then. She had only herself to blame if she had forgotten.

"But the ice is barely out of the river," she exclaimed, still rebellious. "Why must he be in such a hurry?"

"The man with the wish to go as far as he, he must start very early in the season."

"How far is that?"

"The good God alone knows," said Hipolite. "He has the wish to go as far as he can."

Nora heard the voices of the boys and Lydia raised in excited exclamation before the house. She stammered her thanks to Hipolite, turned and ran.

An hour later Lydia found her behind the wild-pear bush by the stream, lying on her back staring at the sky. Lydia sat down and studied her for a long moment. So helpless and inefficient about most of the affairs of life, Lydia had a practical attitude toward the more important emotions.

"So you've made up your mind he's the man for you."

Nora sat up, carefully refusing to meet Lydia's eyes. But she nodded slowly. "Not that it seems to make much difference."

"I'd call a fine house and a whole winter's work quite a difference. I never found a man willing to work that way for me."

"But he's gone, hasn't he?" insisted Nora. "So far—he may never come back."

"And without even waiting for you to thank him," mused Lydia. "I'll admit I don't understand that."

Nora turned on her fiercely. "Of course you don't. You've never had to. From the first minute any man set eyes on you you didn't have to wonder where he was. You never could get rid of him."

"Now wait a minute," chided Lydia. "You're looking at this precisely backwards. Stop thinking about what he may want—or may not want. Think first about what you want. Never forget to do that. It's a woman's only hope."

"Well?"

"I've never seen him, of course. According to you and Dan he's a fine, strong, upstanding young man. But then, most men when they're young have a tendency to seem handsome and virile and attractive. To be safe a woman must look past the person in front to see the kind of man he really is—and is going to be."

"I don't remember your ever looking too close," observed Nora.

"We're talking about you now, dear, and the kind of man you want. Your Matt is only a fur trader. He plans to spend his time in the woods and among the Indians." Lydia caught sight of the bearded Hipolite catching and mounting his mule in the meadow. "As I say, he may be young and handsome now but as time goes on he'll grow into the figure you see out there."

"No he won't," said Nora with conviction.

"Anyway, you'll admit he's a fur trader. When a man once starts to wander he always keeps on. Suppose you do have him. He'll still keep going to the Indian country. You won't know for months at a time where he is. Maybe years at a time. You'll never hear from him. You'll never know what day he may come back. You won't know whether he is ever coming back. You won't know whether he's alive or dead.



Think of all this. Now, doesn't this make some difference in what you think you want?"

"No," said Nora.

"Then you *have* made up your mind," agreed Lydia. She brightened at once. "What have you done about it? I mean—a man's often so slow to catch on. What sort of hints have you given him?"

"None—of course."

"Don't study to be so simple. You can't expect to get something you want just by wishing or dreaming. Why, even a dog doesn't come unless you call him—or at least give some sign to let him know you're there."

"Lydia, why, you sound like—like——"

"Like a doting mother. Which I am. How many times have you met him?"

Through Nora's mind ran the picture of Matt emerging from the night to quell the Shawnee, sleeping across her threshold, kneeling at her feet, carrying her through the marsh, standing at her shoulder under the candlebird tree, appearing suddenly to her in the innyard, smiling at her on the cliff top. "Only twice," she admitted.

"So. Only twice. But just in passing he saved you from Indians and built you a house. You haven't been doing so badly. The thing we must manage is to bring him back a third time. Now don't interrupt. Let me think.—I have it! We must have a housewarming. And we can hardly have one without the man who built the house. We'll invite him. No matter how busy he is getting ready to go wherever he's going he'll have to stop long enough for that. He'll have to come."

"If you think I'm going to wheedle him——"

"Of course not, dear. I'll do the wheedling. Just leave everything to me."

When the barge returned to St. Louis Neb was sent along with Lydia's letter of invitation. After four days Neb returned with the report that Matt was no longer in St. Louis.

Having sampled the prices and goods offered by establishments in St. Louis catering to the requirements of traders, Matt had gone on to investigate comparative values in Cahokia and Kaskaskia.

The next day Austin rode to St. Charles to take his fowling piece to a gunsmith and did not return until he had paid a visit to St. Louis as well. When he came back Nora could tell by the amused glint in his eyes that he knew something the withholding of which would tease either her or Lydia. Finally, at supper, he could wait no longer.

"Pierre Chouteau was telling me about Matt. You know, he's spending Nora's six hundred dollars on goods for the Indian trade."

"It's his six hundred dollars now," said Nora. She glanced around. "I don't imagine anybody ever got as much for six hundred dollars as we did."

"You drove a shrewd bargain all right," Austin agreed. "Well, Pierre was telling about all the questions Matt asks. He's not satisfied with talking to Pierre and Manuel Lisa and some of the big traders—he corners every *engagé*, every visiting Indian, every vagabond that's been fifty miles up the river. He listens to anything anybody will tell him. And he won't buy so much as a handkerchief for his outfit without argument, sometimes with men who know better. He's decided to go in a canoe instead of a bigger boat. Therefore he won't take bales of blankets, or iron kettles, or old muskets, or anything else that's heavy, the way most traders do. He's investing in nothing but articles of high value and little weight—like silver brooches and those blue beads they call chief's beads, and silk shirts. His idea seems to be that he has to travel light if he's to get as far he wants to go."

"When is he going?" asked Nora.

"Any day now."

"Did you—see him?"

"Oh yes."

"How is he?"

"He didn't talk much to me, of course, because I didn't know any of the things he wanted to know. But I could see how excited he was."

There was another pause. This time Lydia spoke. "Well, Daniel, did you by any chance ask him if he received my letter that Neb left for him?"

"What letter?"

"The one asking him to our housewarming."

"Oh yes. Don't know how that slipped my mind. He got it."

The two women waited, Austin went on eating. Lydia's lips tightened.

"Is he coming?"

"He didn't say."

## CHAPTER XI

THAT last week while putting the finishing touches to the house, Matt had straightened often from his work to look out over the river, fearful that any day of the fine spring weather might be bringing Nora from St. Louis. He was not so much afraid of the confusion another meeting with her might cause him as he was afraid for Bap.

All winter Bap had worked hard and cheerfully, a marvel to his fellow townspeople, who had never before known him to perform a single sustained day's labor. At first this unprecedented industry had caused Matt added anxiety. He ascribed it to Bap's desire to be of service to Nora. Bap spoke constantly and freely of her and the excitement the mere thought of her aroused in him. But the more he talked, the more evident it became that his toil was animated by his devotion to Matt and their common project. It seemed not to have occurred to him that there could be any connection between building Nora's house and winning Nora's favor. Neither did he seem to associate the project of success with Nora with the prospect of remaining, necessarily,

thereafter always at her side. According to his experience, fortune in wooing was dependent upon factors somewhat more mysterious and personal.

"We make the six hundred dollar," was his uncomplicated view of their situation. "We show Nora her house." Here he paused to smile contemplatively. "Then we go—so far as we feel like."

Yet Matt was only partially reassured. Whatever Bap's present outlook, there was no telling how completely it might be altered by one more encounter with Nora. This might inspire him to withdraw from the expedition at the last minute in order to remain near her. Matt could not end his suspense by taxing Bap with this. The voicing of his doubt might attract Bap's attention to a temptation of which he might not otherwise become aware.

As the critical moment neared, Matt watched more and more closely. The first sign was not bad. When the last hour's work on the house was finished, still without word or sight of Nora, Bap showed no disposition to linger. Then, when they reached St. Charles, there was a sign that seemed definitely good.

Upon discovering that Matt had commissioned Sylvestre Clappine to build them a canoe, Bap set up a great outcry. He had no objection to Sylvestre, who was famous for his dugouts, thin-walled, rigid, strong, and not so much heavier than a canoe of skin or bark. But Bap had assumed they would go in a pirogue, which required at least four persons to man as against the canoe in which the two partners would comprise the full crew, and had dwelt with pleasure on the prospect of lording it over boatmen selected among his childhood companions in St. Charles.

"For why we work all winter for the six hundred dollar?" he demanded. "For why? So that we make *us engagés*?"

The longer and harder Bap argued, the more relieved Matt became. There could be little question of the sincerity of Bap's concern with the expedition. Matt was prepared, if

it became necessary, to yield, but not until it became absolutely necessary. He pointed out again and again the virtue of traveling light so that they might be the better prepared to travel far.

"Six paddles they go more far than two," persisted Bap.

Bap continued the argument vigorously all the way to St. Louis. But here, to Matt's dismay, he suddenly surrendered. The moment Bap discovered that the Austin house in St. Louis was closed and the family had moved to the new house on the Missouri, he decided that a canoe was ample.

"That Sylvestre he work slow," said Bap. "You stay here and buy the trade goods. Better Bap he go to St. Charles and make sure the canoe she is finish."

"The canoe was practically ready when we left," objected Matt.

"But the trade goods they are here. The canoe she is in St. Charles. Better Bap he paddle the canoe here for the load."

There was so much sense to this argument that Matt was obliged to face the real issue. "You're not going back to St. Charles to see about the canoe," he charged. "You're going because you want to see Nora."

Bap grinned and nodded happily. "For sure," he said. "To see Nora she is not the crime, no?"

To this there could be no sensible answer. Before he could catch himself Matt had made a foolish one. "You're just wasting your time chasing after her."

Bap smiled blandly. "Maybe so. Maybe no." His bright glance searched Matt's flushed face. "You feel good if your friend Bap he have the luck with Nora, eh?"

"The only luck I want you to have is to be ready to go when I am."

"Bap he will be here with the canoe in one week."

Matt attempted no further remonstrance. The sooner Bap saw Nora again, the sooner he would know how much or how little Bap could be depended upon. But for all his

careful resolution, he found himself hurrying his buying trip to Cahokia and Kaskaskia, his mind less on his bargaining for beads, brooches, and handkerchiefs than on the nature of Bap's activities at St. Charles.

He returned to St. Louis to discover that Bap had not arrived. He fumed for nearly another week and still there was no word from him. He thought impatiently of hiring a wagon to transport his goods overland to the Missouri, but resisted this impulse on account of the risk of missing Bap, who might be at the same time coming to St. Louis by river.

Finally, when the canoe did come it was in the custody not of Bap but of his young cousin, Martin Alain.

"Bap said you would pay me three dollar," announced Martin.

"What happened to Bap?"

Martin chose his words with care, lest Matt's still incomplete command of French lead to misunderstanding of certain delicate distinctions in his report. "Bap was too tired. For two day and two nights he has been lifting the elbow."

This was sufficiently startling. In the long community record of Bap's escapades drunkenness, at least, had never before found a place. There was worse to come.

"Yesterday when the mule of Eustache Primeau balked in front of the church Bap bothered Eustache so much Eustache was obliged to pound him."

No man in his right mind would try to pick a quarrel with Eustache. He was a giant of a man, and moreover so good-natured that he would not chastise a tormentor unless intolerably annoyed.

"Last night Bap danced so many times with the wife of François Neissel that François beat him with a club."

Madame Neissel was a woman so ugly that no one would single her out for attention unless with the sole intent of arousing her husband's jealousy.

"This morning when the brothers of Madeleine Franchère were drinking beer at the inn Bap brought Madeleine there

to have a bottle of wine with him. They threw him in the pond."

Sixteen-year-old Madeleine was provocative enough to attract Bap or any other young man, but no one who sought her favor would choose to do so in the presence of her brothers.

Obviously Bap had been possessed by a sudden mysterious yearning to make trouble for himself, to seek conflict and disorder. This did not seem the mood of the successful suitor. But at the same time it suggested a degree of recklessness that augured none too well for the sensible launching of a serious enterprise. More and more perturbed, Matt hastily loaded the canoe and set off for St. Charles.

Gaining the turbulent Missouri, he kept the heavily laden canoe in the slacker current near the south bank until opposite St. Charles before turning across the river to make his landings. In the first light of dawn the widely scattered little houses of the town gleamed vaguely through wreaths of mist. Before Matt had passed mid-river a canoe put off from the water front and swung away in the swifter northern current downstream. Matt gained the impression that the occupant had been watching for the first sight of him before taking off. For a second he wondered, irritably, if the mist-shrouded figure could be Bap, guiltily intent upon avoiding an encounter with him. Then the mist lifted slightly and he saw that the rapidly receding paddler was Neb, Austin's black servant. The impression that Neb's errand might have something to do with his coming was in its own way disturbing.

Matt pulled his canoe up on shore, left the exhausted Martin to sleep on in the bow, and started up the road toward the town, wondering where to begin his search for Bap. But he had no need to search. Bap rose from a seat on a stump where he had been able to watch out over the river and stood in the road awaiting Matt. In outward appearance he had been but little affected by his recent antics. As Matt

came closer Bap continued to regard him with a strange studying stare.

"Bap he never forget," he announced suddenly, his tone harsh with emotion. "He never forget you are Bap's friend."

This seemed an appropriate enough approach to penitence but, as usual, Matt uneasily sidestepped Bap's open expression of affection. "Martin says you've been having quite a time for yourself. All through with your fun?"

"Bap his fun she is finish," agreed Bap.

"All ready to go, eh?"

"When you are ready Bap is ready."

This was too good to be true but most welcome to Matt. He took Bap's arm and turned him toward the canoe. "Well then, what's wrong with right now?"

Bap jerked away and stared at him. For a moment he seemed unable to believe. Then relieved understanding came to him and he nodded. "You come by river. So you stop to see Nora already."

"No," said Matt. "I came past the Austin place about two hours before daylight." He shifted his weight restlessly and started to move around Bap toward the canoe. His argument with Bap was taking a different turn than the one he had foreseen and one that could become much more difficult to deal with. His instinctive reaction to emotional crises was to move hastily away from them.

Bap stepped in front of him. He was trembling with excitement. His speech became intense, spasmodic, seemingly without control. "Many time Bap he is the fool. But you—all the time you are the fool. You are like the little boy no higher than so. Bap have know in the beginning. Only he have not want to believe. But now he have see Nora again. And now he know. She is for you."

"You've no reason to think that," protested Matt.

"Reason? All the time you talk about reason. For many the thing the most big they have no reason."

"You've just got yourself excited," chided Matt, willing to stir Bap to anger as the lesser evil.



Bap remained planted in the path. "She wait for you now."

Since the issue apparently had to be met, Matt determined to meet it squarely. "It's hard to tell which one of us is acting more like a little boy—standing here like we are, talking about something there's no way to settle. I can understand how you feel. When you set your mind on a girl nothing else is important to you. Maybe you're right. In the long run, I suppose, nothing else is so important to a man. But I'm thinking about right now and it's not that important to me now. Nora's a fine girl. We'll neither of us likely ever meet a finer. For me, that only makes it the more necessary to stay away from her. There's no room for a woman—especially one as good as Nora—in the plans I've got. I've got a long way to go. And it may be a long time before I get back. It's time I got started."

"So you have not want Nora," said Bap.

"Sure I want her. Only there's something I want more."

Bap laughed, without merriment and equally without self-pity. "The joke she is on Bap. Always he have any woman. Only this woman he really want she he cannot have." His mirthless laugh came again. "The joke she is more better than that. This woman he cannot have she is for you—and you have not want her." Suddenly he struck Matt hard in the face. Matt did not move or lift a hand to defend himself. Bap drew his knife. "Bap have the feeling to kill you." He spoke slowly, thoughtfully, as if struggling to search out the truth within his own heart. Suddenly his anger flared.

"Come—you are the man. When the time come the man he always must fight." Matt still did not move. Bap did not strike. Instead tears began coursing down his cheeks. "The joke she is more and more better. It is Bap who is not the man. He have the heart more weak than the woman. He must want what Nora want—what his friend want. When this she is not the same he must want for both." Fumblingly he thrust the knife back into its sheath and turned his back,

wiping his eyes on his sleeve with a gesture very much like that of a little boy.

After a moment Matt said, "I want to go—but not so much as I want you to go with me."

Bap nodded. "Tonight we go."

"Why not now?"

Bap turned back. His expression had already cleared. "Because today first you will see Nora in her new house. Now it is Bap who talk with the reason. She have the party to warm the house. She want you to come. She want to thank you for the house. Tomorrow you will go away—maybe for the very long time. Maybe she forget you. Maybe she find another man who is good. But today she want to see you. This she is very little thing. This you will do for her before we go."

## CHAPTER XII

LYDIA had laid her plans with care. Bap had privately given her his guarantee that Matt would come. Neb was waiting at St. Charles with a canoe. The moment Matt arrived from St. Louis Neb paddled downstream to leave word at Riverhill, and then across the river to Bellefontaine, where the army was building the new American cantonment to guard the mouth of the Missouri. Lydia had become acquainted with most of the officers in St. Louis and Neb bore with him an invitation requesting the presence of three of the younger and more eligible at the housewarming. Nora protested vigorously against this elaboration of the occasion.

"Nonsense," said Lydia. "Nothing brings a man to his senses quicker than a glimpse of other men hanging around—especially men in uniform."

Privately, Lydia had another reason. To see Nora attended by other potential suitors might open Matt's eyes. But to see her backwoodsman in the same company with the

comparatively worldly young officers might open Nora's eyes.

The dinner centered about the roasting on spits of a wild turkey and a wild swan that Austin had shot. Lydia insisted also on serving a Virginia ham that had come with the barge from Kentucky.

"Living off the wilderness like he does, he's used to turkey and swan," she pointed out. "Ham will be a treat to him." The familiar faraway look came into her eyes. "A man's bound to think of you some when he's away. No harm in his remembering something special to eat at the same time."

"It's a wonder you were ever content with catching four men," observed Nora.

"One at a time is better," said Lydia complacently. "And each time I took my pick."

Lieutenants Henley and Crenshaw and Ensign May, very stiff and grand in their dress uniforms, gaily grateful for this break in their frontier-post routine, arrived early. They clinked glasses with their host and encompassed their hostess with their gallant attentions. But their side glances continually followed the movements of demurely busy Nora, Lydia noticed with satisfaction. When the backwoodsman arrived this should give him something to think about.

But the backwoodsman did not appear. An hour passed. And then another. It was necessary to hold back the dinner. The delay became increasingly awkward. Nora's cheeks became flushed and she ceased to glance expectantly through the window toward the head of the trail coming up from the river or toward the edge of the woods from which one would emerge who walked overland from St. Charles. Lydia was pleased to observe that Nora seemed more irritated than stricken.

Eventually Nora gave voice to her rising displeasure. "Let's eat," she whispered to Lydia. "I won't keep people waiting another minute."

Now, however, it was discovered that both Frank and Luther were missing. No one recalled seeing them since

breakfast. They did not reply to Austin's calls from the doorway. They were nowhere in sight across the open prairie, even in their favorite haunts along the stream or the margins of the little lakes.

"Hungry as the little animals always are," said Austin, with a puzzled glance at the roast fowls, brown and dripping on the spits before the fire, "I'd have expected them sniffing around the kitchen these last three hours."

"I can't imagine why they're wandering off today," added Lydia. "For the last week they've been talking about little else than seeing Matt."

Lydia's surmise, as was the case with most of her estimates of masculine motive, was well founded. To nine-year-old Frank and six-year-old Luther, steeped in accounts of the family's rescue from the Shawnee, Matt was a legendary hero. They were desperately anxious to make his acquaintance, overflowing with factual questions to ask him. With the wisdom of children they were well aware that their opportunities for fruitful intercourse would be scant once he was surrounded by other adults. Therefore they were determined to intercept him before he had reached the house. They had taken a strategic position halfway up the slope of the small hill at the western edge of the prairie, from which point they could be sure to catch an early sight of his approach whether he came by river or by land.

"Does Matt know everything?" asked Luther, after an interval of deep thought.

The older and wiser Frank gave the question due consideration. "He knows everything about the woods and animals and Indians and things like that."

"I wish I did," sighed Luther. "Do you believe he can really see at night?"

"He followed that Indian that got his rifle all night and through the snow and everything, didn't he?"

"How do you think he did it?"

"We'll ask him."

Frank was one source from which Luther always drew

some sort of an answer. He was not invariably satisfied with the answer, however.

"Suppose he won't tell us?"

Luther had touched the spring of Frank's own secret fear. Of his great need was born a sudden inspiration. He pretended a confidence that had never been shaken.

"He will."

"How you going to make him?"

"Easy." Frank looked at Luther with the assured superiority of an elder's more developed sagacity. "Course you'll have to help—a little."

"How?"

"All you have to do is go down the hill and run around through the woods until you come to the old beaver dam—you know where that is—and you go across that and hide in the reeds."

"What for?"

"What makes you always so slow to catch on? So's Matt can track you—that's what for. Then it won't make no difference whether he tells how he does it or not. I'll be right with him and I can see." He added magnanimously, "And afterward I'll tell you."

"Suppose he don't want to track me?"

"He'll want to all right," insisted Frank.

It had not been Luther's experience that grownups were readily prevailed upon to drop their own obscure devices in order to join him in dealing with his. "He's sweet on Nora." He said this with reluctance. It was the one weakness apparent in the character of the hero. "He'll want to keep going to the house so's he can see her."

Frank shook his head with the familiar maddening assurance of superior understanding. "He'll stop to track you, all right."

"Why?"

"I can make him." Frank paused for full effect. "All I got to do is tell him you're lost."

It was this element of drama that won Luther.

Frank resumed his vigil alone. His first glimpse of Matt was completely satisfying. The tall buckskin-clad figure came striding through the trees, the long rifle swinging in his grasp as naturally as a cane might fit the hand of another man. Frank began to run through the underbrush yelling "Luther—Luther!"

When he burst out of the thicket to confront Matt, Frank recoiled in pretended surprise. Matt studied with immediate interest the flushed, towheaded, bright-eyed boy who, though so much fairer, showed a distinct resemblance to Nora.

"You're Matt, ain't you?" said Frank.

Matt nodded. "And you're Frank."

"How'd you know that?"

"You were calling Luther, weren't you?"

"Yes," admitted Frank. Momentary panic seized him. This man might not prove so easy to fool as most adults. But it was too late to back out now. "Luther's lost."

"What makes you think that?"

"I've been looking everywhere for him."

"Where'd you see him last?"

Frank breathed easier. Matt was evidently in no tearing hurry to get on to see Nora. In fact he seemed almost glad to pause to consider the problem of Luther's disappearance. Everything was going to work out all right after all. "Up the hill there." He gestured vaguely.

Matt walked ahead of him almost directly to the spot where the two boys had watched.

"That's right," said Matt. "Here's where the two of you were sitting together."

"We sat down to rest," extemporized Frank hastily. "That must have been over an hour ago. I think he went off—that way." In his impatience to get Matt on the trail he indicated the direction in which he actually had dispatched Luther, and managed to return Matt's quizzical look with a bland and innocent stare.

"Well, we'll see," said Matt.

Frank let his breath out slowly. "You mean—we can track him?"

"We can try," said Matt cheerfully, and at once set off rapidly around the base of the hill.

Frank trotted beside him, his heart beating high with excitement and triumph. He kept watching Matt, alert for any of those manifestations of a woodsman's magic that enabled him to penetrate the mystery of tracks in the trackless wild. Matt was merely walking along, appearing to pay no more attention to the ground before him than to the trees or the sky overhead.

"He lit out this way all right," observed Matt.

"How do you know he did?"

Matt gave him another of those quizzical glances but followed this with a friendly grin. "Take a look and you can see for yourself. There was a heavy dew last night. That made the dead leaves soft, instead of brittle and hard as they generally are. See—every place that Luther stepped, his weight pressed them down. Look there—and there—and there where he broke that little stick, besides."

Frank was not able to see quite as clearly as Matt had indicated but nevertheless he was overwhelmed by pride and joy. He was being taught to track by a master of the art. He nodded wisely.

"I suppose that's the way you tracked the Indian."

"Something like that," agreed Matt. He pointed again. "Now Luther's running. There's where he fell down. And see that raveling off his shirt caught in the gooseberry bush. He keeps going straight away. Maybe he *is* lost."

Matt began to move faster and Frank had to run to keep up. Then they came out at the edge of the upper meadow and caught sight of Luther's stubby little figure trotting across the old beaver dam. Frank had become so excited by the tracking that upon thus sighting him he let out a wild yell of elation, as if Luther were genuine prey they had been hunting. Luther turned to look over his shoulder, stumbled, and fell into the pool below the dam.

Matt bounded forward. It took him no more than a long minute to reach the stream bank but already the pool was quiet. He dove in, swimming and crawling around the bottom until he came upon Luther's form lying very still beside a stone against which he had evidently struck his head in the fall.

Dragging him ashore, Matt lifted him by the heels and began to shake and squeeze the water out of him. Almost at once the boy began to choke and gasp and gurgle. In another minute he was sitting up, very wet and very scared, but otherwise none the worse except for a bump on the back of his head.

Frank waded across the stream below the pool, carrying Matt's rifle and powder horn. Surveying victim and rescuer, he took a broad and farseeing view of the situation.

"You both got plenty wet. When they see you like that everybody's going to make a terrible fuss about it. And they'll figure out it was my fault. They always do."

"It was your fault," said Luther.

"Afraid your mother will whip you?" Matt asked Frank.

"No. It's Nora I'm thinking about."

"She'll whip you?"

"Oh no. But she'll be plenty mad. And when she's mad she just looks at you and it makes you feel awful."

"I can see that it might."

Matt glanced down at his own and Luther's dripping clothes. "And she won't like the way we look, either. Tell you what. Maybe we better dry off before we go up to the house. It's warm and sunny—and we can build a little fire."

This proposal was greeted with delight. Matt built a fire about which they propped their clothes on sticks. They stretched out on the grass below the bank to bask in the sun. To the boys it was an hour of blissful masculine companionship, sheltered and guarded from all the anxieties that the mysterious expectations of women attached to ordinary family and social existence.

They were dozing contentedly in the sun when the first



sounds of the alarm disturbed their ease. Frank crawled to the top of the bank and leaned back disgustedly to report.

"They're all out looking and yelling for Luther and me. Even those three officers from the fort. This is going to be worse than coming in wet. We're late for that big dinner they been working at so hard. Nora will be——"

"Nora will have a good right to be mad and we'll all feel terrible," finished Matt.

Frank slid down the bank. "You were the one she counted on most," he warned Matt, reminding him that he too was a culprit with little reason to take this too lightly. "Of course she'll blame me."

"Well, it was all your idea," said Luther.

Matt eyed them thoughtfully. "Maybe we shouldn't just squat here until we're caught. If we sneak around through the edge of the woods and get clear back to the house before we let them see us we won't look so foolish."

The full, well-rounded beauty of this stratagem was instantly apparent. They dressed hastily. Matt covered the fire with wet sand. They set off single file, the boys painstakingly imitating Matt's every move, obeying eagerly his every signal. This was more exciting than tracking. This was making their way dangerously through the heart of the enemy's country in the very presence of the enemy.

They worked along the line of underbrush dividing the prairie from the forest, grinning callously as they listened to the various anxious outcries rising from the search and at times even getting a glimpse of the searchers. But in spite of their care and Matt's ingenious leadership, Nora saw them before they had gained the sanctuary of the house.

She was returning from a hurried search along the path to the river, where she half-suspected they might have gone in the hope of meeting Matt, when she chanced to see them immediately below her, crawling up a narrow gully to regain the crest of the bluff before the house. She stifled her exclamation of relief and indignation when she noticed the expression on the boys' faces. Matt saw her and started to

rise in surrender but she hastily motioned to him to keep on. It would be a shame to subject them to the humiliation of detection at this last moment.

That one glance at the faces of Frank and Luther had enlightened her. Thrown so much with relatives and strangers, the two boys were inclined to be secretive, critical, and self-sufficient in their relations with adults. They loved her, but even with her there were many reticences mixed with their devotion. Now after one hour's association with Matt they had accepted him as companion, hero, and master, endowing him with every quality of the father neither had ever known. Nora was gladdened, yet half-rebellious. There must be some end to what this man could bestow upon her, some beginning to what she could give to him.

She waited until the fugitives had reached the house before following. Frank and Luther came running across the kitchen to catapult into her in the doorway.

"Luther got lost!" cried Frank. "And Matt tracked him all through the woods—just as easy—just like he did the Indian."

"I did not get lost," protested Luther.

"Well, you fell in the water and he had to fish you out, and that was worse."

"I did not—I mean—we wasn't going to tell that part."

"What's the difference? Nora'd see your shirt was damp. Anyway, Matt built a fire and dried you off. And then we came back, keeping out of sight and covering our trail just like we was in the middle of the Indian country."

Nora looked over their heads at Matt.

"You can see they're all right," he said.

"Listen, you two," said Nora. "Everybody else is still out looking for you. Run now and call them in."

But their noisy departure did not leave Nora and Matt without distraction. The recent clamor had awakened both babies. Mark was jumping up and down in his crib, yelling with excitement, and Linda was bellowing with the outrage of the suddenly awakened. Nora flew to quiet this new tu-

mult. She pushed Mark's crib nearer the fire, where he subsided to stare, fascinated, at the flames, and gave Linda a piece of maple sugar to suck. She turned breathlessly to Matt. Even then she temporized.

"I don't know yet what happened but I hope they didn't make you too much trouble," she said.

"No trouble at all," said Matt. "And if we're late it's been mainly my fault. I was glad for a chance to see something of them. I like your children."

He was walking toward her. There was a new, warming assurance in his manner. He was looking directly at her without any of the uneasiness that had seemed to instill a kind of tension in all their former meetings.

"Here I've been with you for minutes," she cried, "without saying a word about this—and oh, I don't know how I can find the words! This house, Matt—it's—it's so much what I wanted."

"That's the reason it's yours. You thought it out. You planned it. You paid for it. All I did was work on it."

"But you worked so hard. You did so much in one winter."

"You can thank Bap for getting so much done," he said. "He worked as much as I did. And more than that—he knew how to get the help of all St. Charles whenever we needed it. He had only to get hold of a fiddler, open a keg of wine, and mention the word 'barbecue' to have the whole town here working as they'd never dream of working for themselves. A roast elk got the stones carried down from the ledge, a fat bear was enough to get the timbers dragged up from the bottom and the planks sawed, and a couple of hundred pigeons we knocked down in a night got both house and barn raised. Whenever you want help in this country just get Bap to invite people to a barbecue."

Before Nora could say more the others swarmed in upon them. The warming intimacy of their brief moment together was dissipated by the flurry of general chatter, which to Nora seemed incredibly meaningless.

The instinctive disfavor with which the gallant young officers were prepared to regard the backwoods interloper was increased by the suspicion that he had been in some fashion connected with the recent alarm which had so ruffled their dignity. Lieutenant Crenshaw's glittering boots had been smeared with mud, Lieutenant Henley had had a strip of gold braid torn from his sleeve, and Ensign May had lost an epaulet. Matt ignored certain veiled allusions to his possible guilt and shook hands in silent gravity as Nora presented him to the officers and then to Lydia, who had come in last.

Nora watched with acute suspense as Lydia's frankly inquisitive glance roved swiftly over Matt's figure, to hold still on his face.

"I know it's trite to say so, Mr. Morgan," exclaimed Lydia, "but I do declare I'm glad to see you—after all I've heard about you."

At the sound of Lydia's voice Linda set up an instant hungry wail. The men moved to the end of the table to cluster about Austin's bottle. Lydia retreated to a stool in the chimney corner, where with her back to the room she began to nurse Linda. Nora knelt beside her to baste and warm the spitted birds.

"I'm glad he shaved," whispered Lydia. "I'd feared something of a beard. He's really not bad-looking."

While Austin accompanied his ceremonial pouring of the drinks with a detailed account of the respectable age of the whisky, which was from a keg that had come over the Blue Ridge with his father and now had come down one great river and up two others with him, Lieutenant Henley kept eying Matt thoughtfully. Suddenly he slapped his leg as he recaptured a memory.

"I knew you reminded me of somebody, Mr. Morgan," he said. "Aren't you the young man Captain Stoddard was telling about—the one that was left behind by Lewis and Clark because he had abducted the wife of an Osage Indian?"

"You have the story a bit twisted," Matt said. "I *was* left behind by Lewis and Clark. But the girl was the daughter of the chief of the Great Osage town. And she wasn't abducted. She came away quite willingly."

Lydia leaned against Nora delightedly. "Don't you dare let him get away from you. Why, he's unbelievable. He looks like a Grecian statue, he dresses like a backwoodsman, he talks like a scholar, and he steals Indian princesses."

Nora glimpsed the glint of humor in Matt's eyes and with the discovery she found herself able to share some of Lydia's appreciation. Lydia rose to replace Linda in her cradle.

"You must tell us more about your Indian enchantress," she demanded.

"There's little more to tell. Her people caught me and beat me within an inch of my life."

"How terrible."

"On the contrary, it served me right. It's always stupid to be caught."

There was no quiver of humor in his expression to accompany the last remark. Crenshaw rallied to the support of his comrade in arms.

"It seems quite the custom for the men of this district to form temporary alliances with Indian women. Do they find them then so attractive?"

Matt considered the difficult question with calm. "They are, of course, a different race—and standards differ." He turned and bowed to Lydia. "Few, I should say, are what we—when among our own people—have been led to consider beautiful."

Lydia sank into a deep curtsy. "Thank you, sir." Straightening, she whispered in Nora's ear, "If I were five years younger I vow I wouldn't let you have him."

Nora barely heard, for in that instant through the open doorway she had glanced Hipolite whipping his mule across the meadow toward the house. Then she saw that Matt too had caught sight of the messenger and that to him it meant

the possibility of an urgent summons. Matt had his cap and rifle in hand and was out the door by the time Hipolite had pulled up his mule in the dooryard. Hipolite's message was delivered with many grunts of indignation and growls of rage. Matt waited to hear only a part before turning abruptly to his hosts and fellow guests.

Nora watched, stunned, and listened without heed as he paid his hasty farewells to the others, made his earnest excuses to Lydia. His words seemed as meaningless as all the recent foolish chatter. He was leaving, now, without warning, without time for her to prepare herself for the event, and as in a bad dream, without her being able to say anything or do anything to prevent his going. All Lydia's plans of the past week, all her own hopes of the past winter, had come to nothing, like the devices of children who have failed to take actual circumstances into account. Now he was turning toward her.

Matt caught her hands and pressed them between his own. To his surprise he found nothing in the moment to make him feel in the least uneasy or awkward. A new ease of mind had come to him with his first encounter with the boys, and had grown as he met Nora, listened to her gratitude, sparred with the officers and Lydia. Nora was now secure in the possession of all that she most needed. She had home, family, children, friends—even suitors. She had no need of him. He could go in peace.

His intent look lifted from her face to move slowly around the circle of her loved ones and the walls of her house. "While I am away it will be a wonderful pleasure to remember you so well situated."

The next second Nora was watching him running at Hipolite's stirrup. The others crowded, peering, in the doorway. Lydia quickly joined Nora at the window.

"He's gone," said Nora. "He'll never be back. I might as well start now getting used to it."

Lydia studied, smiling gently, the altogether pleasing person of her daughter. With a light finger tip she teasingly

traced the line of Nora's darkly arched eyebrows, the straight nose, the full lips, the rounded chin, the lovely curve of throat and shoulder and bosom.

"He'll be back," she said, nodding sagely.

The men at the door turned, amazed, to each other. Nothing about the backwoodsman's delayed arrival or his brief presence in the house had been more notable than the manner of his departure.

"What in thunder could that Frenchman with the beard have said to take him off like that?" demanded Henley.

"My French is pretty lame," said Austin, "but I'll swear I caught something about billiards."

"I heard quite distinctly," affirmed May. "The fellow on the mule challenged him to a game of billiards."

## CHAPTER XIII

**H**IPOLITE'S diatribe lasted the whole way to St. Charles. Matt wasted no breath on questions. Hipolite was repeating himself over and over again but each time he circled the occasion for his immense indignation in the search for words of sufficient fervor he threw in an additional detail, so that gradually the picture was becoming complete.

The burden of his complaint was that what was being done to Matt should not be done to a dog and that it was beyond reason, even for one with the record for foolishness long since established by his nephew, to scatter another man's property to the four winds. It was bad enough, though altogether to be expected, for Bap to lose what was his own, but only half the partner's trade goods was his and so it was another man's property, and that man his best friend, with which Bap was making so free. Matt was a good man, substantial and sensible, while Bap's achievements were confined to the dance floor and other people's beds. Except for his association with Matt, Bap's lifelong estate would never have amounted to the value of three summer-musk-

rat skins. Moreover, the property involved had been accumulated for the Indian trade. A man embarking on the Indian trade certainly had a right to expect he would not be set upon by his own canoe mate, since once he started upriver he was bound in any event to suffer innumerable disasters breaking upon him from all other quarters. Upon this, the topic nearest his heart, Hipolite dilated vigorously and at great length.

Eventually through the smoke of his indignation appeared the sparks of essential fact. Honoré Adam had gathered a boatload of trade goods with which he was leaving for the Osage next week. Careful examination by experienced citizens of St. Charles had determined the value to be in the neighborhood of a hundred plus, roughly equal to the value of the outfit assembled by Matt and Bap. Billiards was the great local game of skill and chance and the table in the tavern of Pierre Querrel the center of the town's masculine social life. Bap considered himself the champion billiard-player of St. Charles. Honoré Adam was entertaining a visiting cousin from Detroit, one Michel Fipe. This Fipe had proved himself a more than tolerable billiard-player. After a week of adroit maneuvering Honoré Adam had provoked a challenge from Bap and a match between Bap and the stranger had been arranged. Bap, confident of his own prowess and excited by taunts, had bet the entire outfit belonging to him and Matt against that of Honoré Adam. When Hipolite, having chanced to overhear something between Honoré and his cousin, had rushed to warn Bap that this Michel Fipe was actually the recognized billiard champion of Detroit, a community far more considerable than St. Charles, Bap had merely become angry. He declared he would not withdraw if Fipe were the champion of Paris. It was too late for Matt to do anything to stop it, for by now the match was surely in progress, but Hipolite had decided that Matt at least should know his property was being dissipated.

Matt's first anger passed, leaving him with a feeling of



cold emptiness. He had already lost a year. Now he was losing another. Before him loomed another winter to be spent laboriously restoring his stock of supplies. He should have known better than to leave Bap so long to his own devices on this day of all days, the critical day of their departure.

The mule tired and Matt ran on ahead. Everyone in the village was gathered in or around Pierre Querrel's tavern, those unable to get inside standing in breathless silence for whispered reports on the fortunes of the game that were passed back by those at the windows. His arrival created an immediate stir of additional interest. The crowd readily made way for him and he pushed through it into the tavern until he had reached the front rank of privileged spectators encircling the billiard table at the distance of a cue length.

Matt's first glance was at Bap, who looked alarmingly flushed and excited, and his next at his opponent, who was continuing a run. Michel Fipe was an insignificant bald little man with straggling sad mustaches, but his touch with the cue was as delicate and controlled as that of a watchmaker with his tweezers. When finally he missed, he had still contrived to leave the balls in a nearly impossible position for Bap.

During his convalescence Matt had been forced occasionally to observe the games of billiards that were endlessly under way in the tavern, but with mild scorn of such time-wasting he had paid very little attention. He did know enough, however, to read the score. When Pierre Querrel with his rag and chalk had wiped the slate and recorded Fipe's run the score stood: Fipe 93. Bap 86. Apparently Bap had not been too hopelessly distanced. But Michel Fipe's composure was unmistakable. There was no question he knew himself to be master of the situation.

Bap was bending over his cue when he saw Matt. He rushed over to him.

"My friend. I am happy you are here to see." His face was red, his eyes gleamed, his breath smelled of wine.

"You watch now while Bap he make for you one hundred plus."

Slipping his cue under his arm, Bap raised both hands and slapped Matt affectionately on either side of the face. He darted back to the table, prepared to shoot, welcomed a better idea, ran around to the scoreboard, reached for the bottle standing above it, and took a long gurgling drink. He waved the bottle in grave salute to the assembly, restored it to its place, resumed his position at the table, sighted long and carefully—and miscued.

A murmuring groan ran through the crowd. Until now Bap's fellow townsmen, except for a few who would have been pleased to see him brought down a peg or two no matter by whom, had been moved by a partisan feeling for him and against the stranger. But the murmur expressed a change in public sentiment. He was heedlessly wasting whatever chance he had ever had and to lose was no less than his just desert.

All looked suddenly at Matt. Though a foreigner, he had become popular during his summer's residence. Without being consulted he had been committed to the risk of all his property. Public opinion was offering him the chance to call a halt.

Bap, for all his apparent befuddlement, understood and shook his head beseechingly. Honoré Adam leaped forward with loud protests.

"No—no—no!" he cried. "It is a match. It is a wager."

All continued to look at Matt. The decision was for him to make. He promised himself that when he got Bap alone he would slowly strangle him. But he could not bring himself to humiliate Bap here in front of his own people.

"So far as I go—it's a match," he announced. He added untruthfully, "As a matter of fact, I think Bap can still beat him."

The crowd's astonishment dwindled to a mutter and then into silence. Michel Fipe stepped forward to administer the coup de grâce. Bap was watching him sharply but even

Bap could hardly be fool enough to imagine he still had a chance. Bap's miscue had been lucky in one sense. It had left Michel Fipe a nearly impossible shot. But he made it. He then began with calm assurance to run out his hundred. Matt saw Bap suddenly relax slightly. Michel Fipe was beginning to make each successive shot the hardest way, exhibiting for the benefit of the onlookers his extraordinary skill. The crowd muttered. It was now clear that no matter how well Bap had played, the stranger would have beaten him easily. Honoré Adam scowled. His cousin was betraying the fact that Bap had been made the victim of a carefully laid scheme. Approaching his hundred, Michel Fipe descended to trick shots. Ninety-eight he made left-handed. Ninety-nine he made with the butt of his cue. For his hundred he rose to the climax of an elaborate three-cushion shot. It was a miss, though a narrow one.

The crowd's gabble was mainly indignant. Honoré Adam began to laugh loudly and to pose boldly in the face of public disapproval as one who had been shrewd enough to plan a profitable coup.

No one paid any attention to Bap as he stepped up to the table. Only Matt noticed that his hand was suddenly steady, his eyes clear, his manner completely assured. The three-cushion miss had left him a setup. This he began to nurse carefully along the rail, clicking off a quick half-dozen before the crowd became aware of this unexpected development.

The buzz of a fly was the loudest sound in the room as Bap slowly and carefully ran through his middle nineties. Honoré Adam was beginning to sweat and Michel Fipe to look sadder than his mustaches. Bap planned his corner play cautiously in advance. With a sharp draw shot he reversed his position, maintaining his gather, and continued nursing his run along the end rail. His hundredth shot was one a blind man could have made, but Bap took the same care with it.

The onlookers burst into a yell that lifted the roof. Bap

forced his way out of the press of his admirers and dragged Matt into a corner.

"Matt, my friend," he declared earnestly, "Bap he love only you. Everybody they think Bap the fool. But you keep for him the confidence."

"I thought then you were a fool," said Matt. "And I still think you were a fool. And I've no confidence in you whatever."

Bap was too jubilant to heed. "Honoré Adam he make Bap the fool—at first. That Michel Fipe he play here all week—just good. But when the match she start, with the first ten Bap he see Michel Fipe he five times good. Whenever he want he make five hundred while Bap he make fifty. Bap he was the fool. It is too late. So Bap he take the one chance. He shoot bad. He make play with bottle. Honoré Adam he want this to look like real match. Michel Fipe he want to show off. So they wait for Bap. And Bap he wait for setup. When the setup she come—poof! Now who is the fool?"

"The only thing that I'll admit is that you're a fool for luck," said Matt. "And such luck is bound to change. If the Indians or the river don't get us, you surely will."

"For you my luck she will always be good," insisted Bap gaily. Sobering, he added: "And for Nora. Now we will go in the pirogue and have two times so many goods for the trade. You will get rich in the one season. We will bring back for Nora everything that she want."

So all they possessed had been risked through Bap's desire to improve Nora's expectations. But at this moment, on the eve of their departure, this was a dangerous topic, much better dropped.

"There'll still be no pirogue," Matt ruled grimly. "We'll go ahead just as we had planned. We'll leave this stuff of Adam's behind so that if anything goes wrong we'll have something to fall back on. With you along we'll need it. And if you're out of my sight for one minute from now on—I'll start without you."

Oblivious to Bap's moans of dissent, Matt forced him to place his mark on the letter he wrote and turned over to Hipolite with instructions to deposit the Adam goods with Pierre Chouteau in St. Louis to be held in his warehouse until such time as the partners made demand for it or its equivalent value.

Bap's spirits recovered at the dance that night, where he was accepted as the hero of the hour. His elation that he had been able to serve Nora and Matt so well knew no bounds. For hours he danced and leaped and struck his heels together until only the youngest wives of the oldest husbands were left with the spirit to swing around the floor with him. When at midnight the voyageurs embarked, every husband under eighty waded waist-deep into the river to give the canoe one last shove.

The torches on the bank fell away to the eastward and they were alone on the dark river. From time to time Bap emitted a piercing yell, his gaiety still unsubdued. Though silent, Matt felt an even deeper exultation. At last he was on his way. The steady rhythm of his paddle carried on the beat. On his way. On his way. On his way.

## CHAPTER XIV

MATT awoke at dawn to look up into the paling sky. A great owl, patrolling the border between forest and river, swooped so low that Matt could almost feel the stir of air from the slow beat of the silent wings. High above, a pair of hawks circled in amorous pursuit of each other. From the estuary of the little creek beyond the fringe of reeds in which the canoe was hidden came the pleasant slap of a leaping trout. From the underbrush at the edge of camp came the faint acrid scent of a fox, drawn by his irresistible curiosity to inspect the unfamiliar phenomenon of man's presence.

Matt rose on one elbow to look out over the brown sweep

of the river. From the turtle crawling patiently on the strand an arm's length away to the swarms of waterfowl spiraling above the sandspits in midstream to the great trees on the farther bank, the overriding impression was of the abounding vigor and plenty of the life that permeated this world which was lonely only to man. The very river, tearing through its shallow valley on its seaward course, exhibited a kind of life, a ravening and predatory vitality, as it alternately drowned and fertilized, uprooted and replanted, here carried away the soil itself and there endowed it with new fertility. Like the gods of antiquity, the river represented as one form and one force the opposing powers of creation and destruction, of life and death.

An ever stronger sense of well-being suffused Matt. He had become a part of this vitality, of this loneliness, of this freedom and movement. Unlike Bap, who was able freely to express his contentment by spontaneous yells, snatches of song, and foolish capers, he could express his only by turning his thoughts inward. He could be sure he had chosen well. He could know that what he was doing was what he wanted most to do.

Breakfast finished, he stowed blankets and frying pan, shoved the canoe into the water, and turned, waiting for Bap. Bap, seated on the bank, lingered over the lighting of his pipe, then rose and stretched luxuriously.

"This she is one fine morning," he declared.

"Wonderful," agreed Matt.

"Always you hurry fast."

"We've got a long way to go."

"That she is so," said Bap, strolling toward the canoe. He looked back downriver with a thoughtful smile. "When you tell Nora you come back?"

"How could I tell her? I don't know myself."

Bap stood still. He seemed to be listening to something that threatened like the swish of an Indian arrow.

"Matt?"

"Yes."

"You go to her house yesterday?"

"Yes."

"You see her?"

"Yes."

"But you do not talk to her about when you come back?"

Matt tried hard to control his sudden anger. "Look, Bap, you keep letting your imagination run away with you. Nora knows what she wants. And she's already got it." He rocked the canoe impatiently. "Come on, get in."

Bap walked back and sat down on the bank. "Me I go back," he announced quietly. "You are still the fool—and the fool she is no good for the partner."

Matt slowly drew the canoe up on the shore and began to unload it. Bap watched while the cargo was divided into two piles.

"There's your half," said Matt. "I'll take the canoe. I'll need a good one. You can make a bark one for your one day's run downriver."

"You go on alone, eh?"

"I'm certainly not going back."

Bap rose wearily. "You have beat Bap," he admitted. "You go alone—for sure you never get back. For Nora that will be bad."

He began reloading the canoe. But for days thereafter he spoke only when their work together made it absolutely necessary. After a time Matt disgustedly abandoned his tentative efforts to relieve the tension. They pressed on, their manner that of strangers, almost of enemies, within the narrow circle of their necessarily intimate association.

The whole first month the weather favored them. Seldom was there sufficient head wind or rough water to force them to pull up on the bank. At times they breasted the main current by exerting the sheer brute strength of furious paddling. More often they angled and tacked, took advantage of slack water and eddies, sought out minor currents and parallel lagoons. Like all habitants, Bap was a born boatman. He had only once voyaged above the mouth of the Osage, but

he had an instinctive feeling for the vagaries of the terrible river. On good days they made twelve to fifteen miles and every day they toiled unremittingly from dawn to dusk. The need of hunting for food cost them no time, for as they approached a prospective camping place there was always a goose, a swan, or a turkey, a coon, a deer, or a bear, within gunshot.

At the mouth of the Osage they kept warily close to the north bank. Parties of Osage occasionally descended to their river's estuary to fish. Ordinarily the Osage were friendly to white traders, but for these two traders another encounter with Tallee was undesirable.

They worked their way past the mouth of the Kansas in a driving rainstorm, glad of the cover against observation from the west bank. The Kansas often came down from their town to watch on the banks of the Missouri and they were notorious robbers who delighted in pillaging trading craft.

Here the course of the Missouri made its great turn to the north, to continue northward over fifteen hundred miles to the distant towns of the Mandan. From here on, also, the character of the forest bordering the river began gradually to change. Patches of unwooded prairie appeared more frequently, and finally there came glimpses of the plains stretching away from the crest of the river's trough to the farthest horizon.

Finally, they came upon the spectacle for which the Missouri traveler perpetually strained his eyes. They saw their first buffalo. They had been dragging the canoe along the muddy western shore in order to get around an *embarras* hanging to a midstream island. Launching their canoe again, they had just rounded a willow leaning out from the bank when both suddenly thrust their paddles into the mud to hold the craft motionless.

On the bank above them, not fifty feet away, stood a tremendous old bull. At his age he had been slow in shedding his winter coat and great flakes and patches of sun-browned, mud-covered, last year's hair dangled grotesquely from his



flanks and shoulders. Yet like the ragged raiment of some mad king the very wretchedness of his coat seemed but to add to his fierce and imposing dignity. Through the matted tangle of hair that hung over his eyes he gave them one glance of disdain and resumed rubbing and scratching his back against the low branch of an oak.

Bap reached for his rifle but Matt signaled delay. The presence of the old bull indicated a herd somewhere near and he wanted to see it. Loosening their paddles, they let the canoe drift below the willow, drew it up on shore, recharged their rifles, and began crawling up a gully that led inland.

Both men were shivering with the most intense excitement that could come to hunters—the anticipation of a first buffalo kill. To the neophyte, who had to remain a humble listener to the accounts of those veterans of genuine experience in that far country where the buffalo ranged, it meant he had at last escaped from the novice class. Moreover, intrinsically the buffalo was a magnificent prey, gigantic in size, majestic in appearance, and given to assembly in stupendous numbers. Aroused, the herd's momentum shook the earth. To hunt the buffalo was like taking part in some great natural upheaval. A man gained in stature.

Bap had had no more actual experience with buffalo than Matt. On his one voyage to the Platte he had been a simple *engagé* whose activities had been confined to the deck of the keelboat. But both had heard so much of buffalo-hunting that they knew how to proceed and almost what to expect. There was a fresh west wind and they made their way up a side gully so that they might be moving directly upwind. They crept to the head of it, peered through a fringe of gooseberry bushes out over the plain, and held their breath.

The shallow valley was dotted by some hundreds of peacefully grazing and idling buffalo. It was not a large herd but it made a goodly show. Most had finished shedding and their bright new hair caused their great bodies to stand out boldly against the green of the grass. Their manes were

a glistening ebony and their hindquarters smooth as black velvet.

Several were within a hundred yards, and Bap began sliding his rifle forward. Matt restrained him again. He wanted first to watch and to appreciate the spectacle.

Some of the buffalo were lying down, chewing their cud as contentedly as so many Jersey cows. One old female, followed by a dozen others in placid single file, was leading the way to a water hole. Several of the great animals were on their backs, legs in air, squirming, rubbing against the ground, succeeding, in spite of their pronounced humps, in rolling over with ease. A group of spike bulls had collected, their heads together as if in conversation, their idleness occasionally interspersed with teasing lunges and feints at one another in the manner of adolescents of all species. Young calves, their smooth, wavy-haired, reddish coats in striking and incongruous contrast to their shaggy black parents, were gamboling, playing, butting, and darting back and forth with their tails stiffly erect. A number of older animals, still troubled by unshed hair, stood with gratefully arched backs while tick birds strutted up and down their spines picking at parasites.

The birds presently became aware of Matt and Bap and, to the hunters' annoyance, flew across to hover directly over them, eying them with intense and fearless curiosity. The buffalo herd, however, paid them no more attention than before.

A huge bull, apparently the king of the herd, stalked deliberately into the foreground to sniff at a moist area in the prairie. Kneeling on one knee, he began to tear up the soft ground with his horns, letting the marsh water collect in the holes he was making. He continued this process until he had the equivalent of a child's mud pie. Thereupon he lowered his body into it and began throwing himself about with a rotary motion until he was completely covered with mud and water, thus gaining the relief he sought from heat and flies. Lesser bulls assembled, docilely waiting their turn,

and when their leader had withdrawn, each in succession repeated the performance, until the mud bath had become a wide circular pit filled with water. Later, the pit, drying, would remain as another of the innumerable buffalo wallows that dotted the Western plains.

The wind died down. A young cow near by lifted her head and sniffed. Their presence was finally about to be detected. Matt nodded, releasing Bap's impatience. Bap had kept his sight on a cow for the last ten minutes and was instantly ready to fire. Matt selected another a little farther away, aiming, as he had been told so often to do, at a spot just back of the foreleg a foot above the brisket. The shots rang out almost as one. Both victims snorted, coughed, sagged, and slowly collapsed, blood gushing from their nostrils.

The herd took no notice whatever of the sound of the shots and but little of the fall of their companions. Several of the nearer animals edged over to sniff curiously at the blood. One cow, obscurely irritated, drove a horn angrily into her prone and expiring sister. The vast majority of the herd continued to graze and idle and rest as if nothing had occurred. Matt and Bap had reloaded and could have continued to shoot had they chosen.

It was not until the hunters had risen and started to walk forward that the herd took alarm. Even then they were alarmed less by the sight of their enemies than by the scent that more and more of them were beginning to pick up. They began to mill around, wildly and frantically, one group, following an old cow, almost running over the advancing men. At last a puff of contrary wind made the origin of the smell unmistakable. It was only then that the herd gathered with purpose and charged off, lumbering in wild panic until they were lost to sight over a fold of the prairie.

Matt and Bap surveyed their respective kills with concealed pride, each pretending complacence that a single shot had been sufficient. They had been so well tutored by

the boasting tales of others of more experience, describing the relative excellence of various portions of the buffalo's famed anatomy, that they knew precisely how to proceed. They turned the first cow into an upright position, using the spraddled legs as props, parted the hide down the back, removed the hump ribs, the fleece fat, the marrowbones, the liver, and the tongue, and folded these delicacies in a section of the hide for convenience in carrying. They butchered the second cow with equal care—though even the choice portions of the two animals amounted in the aggregate to more than enough to satisfy the needs of a full keelboat crew—since each was bent on savoring fully the meat of his own first buffalo.

Swinging the pleasantly heavy loads to their shoulders, they had started back to the river when they saw the calf. He was a sturdy red, three-months-old specimen that had become bewildered when the herd had stampeded. In his fright he had taken care to hide himself, which he had accomplished by dropping to his knees, thrusting his head into a tuft of grass and pea vine, and closing his eyes tightly. When the hunters paused at his very side, he still clung steadfastly to his place of concealment, though his stiffly erect hindquarters were thrust most ostentatiously up into the open and even his head with the screwed-up eyes was plainly visible in the wisps of grass and vine.

Bap bent down and emitted a startling yell. The calf shivered but held to his position.

"The buffalo," scoffed Bap, who, in the excitement of the hunt had forgotten his resentment, "she start stupid and she stay stupid."

Bending again, he tickled the calf in the ribs. At the first touch of his fingers the calf rose convulsively into the air, as with the uncoiling of a spring, and alighted charging. Bap, surprised and off balance, was caught in the knees by the calf's first onslaught and brought down ingloriously, his treasured meat spilled over him. The calf, not satisfied with his initial victory, pressed the attack, butting, and striking

with his hoofs, persisting so vigorously that Bap, draped with buffalo meat, fat, and hide, was hard put to it to defend himself. Matt seated himself on the ground so that he might laugh in greater comfort.

Bap contrived to hold the calf off until he could get to his knees and then became involved in a desperate wrestling match in which the calf continued to kick and butt most violently while Bap endeavored to gain control of the situation by embracing him about the middle. The contest was prolonged by Bap's eager desire to direct the animal's belligerence toward Matt, but the calf would have none of this and persisted in regarding Bap as his one enemy. At length Bap, by a final mighty heave, succeeded at least in upsetting the calf's equilibrium, and then kept him from getting up by sitting on his head.

"Unfair," said Matt. "You haven't won. You're only smothering it."

Bap affected to share Matt's amusement, but his attempt to grin merely discovered a split lip. He made no move to release the calf.

"Better he rest," he explained. "He is tired."

"Rest as long as you like," said Matt. He rose with unsympathetic calm, glanced at the descending sun, and picked up his rifle and meat.

Bap reluctantly gathered his feet under him, sprang aside, and took up an attitude of defense. The calf did not move.

"Told you you'd smothered it," accused Matt.

"Maybe," agreed Bap, hopefully.

He backed away, watching, and began hurriedly picking up his scattered meat. The calf's eyes opened. Bap snatched up his meat, not even pausing to brush off the accumulation of leaves, twigs, and sand, bundled it into the hide, backed away another few steps, turned and started away with long, relieved strides. Suddenly the calf sprang to its feet.

"Look out," taunted Matt. "He's after you."

Bap gave a great leap to one side and whirled to lift one foot to strike back at the assailant. But the calf halted,

looked at him reproachfully, and gave a disarming amiable little bleat. Bap edged away sidewise, warily on guard. The calf trotted after him, moved now, obviously, only by the wish to remain near. Belligerence had been replaced by affection. Bap scowled and lengthened his stride. The calf broke into a trot and remained at his heels.

"It is the meat," argued Bap. "He smell the buffalo. That is what he follow. Look."

Bap dropped his burden and walked on. The calf paid not the slightest attention to the hide or its contents. When Bap paused in disgust, the calf rubbed contentedly against his leggings. Bap stalked back to recover his meat.

"Get away!" he cried.

The calf bleated and licked his moccasins.

Noting the lateness of the hour, Matt controlled his laughter. "Come on," he urged. "Let's eat."

The calf trotted along behind. Presently Bap ceased to scowl. By the time they reached the riverbank he was stealing glances over his shoulder, the way a small boy looks to see that a stray dog is still following him.

The men dumped their loads in the canoe and looked at the calf, waiting there expectantly.

"We can't camp here," said Matt. It was the accepted rule on the Missouri that the one reasonably safe place to light a fire was on an island.

"That is so," agreed Bap.

He turned suddenly on the calf, bellowed ferociously, made furious menacing gestures. The calf retreated just out of reach and stared, puzzled but forgiving. The two men leaped into the canoe and pushed off.

Behind them rose the calf's plaintive bleats. Bap resisted the temptation to look back.

"The buffalo," he recalled angrily, "she start stupid and she stay stupid."

They concealed their canoe on the island shore and, deep in a screen of alders, built their fire. They split the marrow-bones and arranged them at the edge of the coals, propped

the ribs up on sticks, and when they began to sizzle, laid strips of fat over them. The aroma of wood smoke and broiling meat hung pleasantly about the fire.

Dusk gathered. A long dismal wolf's howl was answered by another more distant. The two men carefully avoided each other's glance.

"The ribs they start to march good," said Bap. With great care he turned the meat on the sticks to present the opposite side to the fire and rearranged the dripping strips of fat.

The distant howling of the wolves was suddenly succeeded by an outburst of nearer barks and snarls.

"Sounds like they've found what we left of those two cows," said Matt. He examined the marrowbones and moved them slightly farther away.

"That is so," agreed Bap.

It took more of an effort now to avoid each other's eyes, to seem not to strain to listen, to resist the impulse to peer into the thicket of alders that blocked their view of the shore where they had left the calf.

The clamor of the wolves hit a new note, more weird and sinister, a frenzy of shrill yelps and whines and screams. The wolves were no longer concerned with the dead. They were hunting something alive.

Matt's and Bap's eyes at last met, equally sheepish, equally decided. They seized their rifles and ran for the canoe, leaving their prized first-buffalo meat to char untended.

The calf was no longer on the shore by the willow. The wolf tumult was concentrated just beyond the rim of the bluff above. The two men, breathing hard, scrambled vengefully up the bank until they could see over into the plain.

Their calf was there and had indeed been the intended prey of the wolves. Twenty or thirty great gray Plains wolves were frothing and raging around it. But the calf had already found his natural protectors. His own kind had returned to look for their lost one. Ten or a dozen

buffalo bulls had closed in around him, their lowered horns and stamping hoofs forming a bulwark the wolves could not penetrate. From time to time the compact group of bulls moved slowly in the direction of the main herd, the small figure of the calf trotting safely in their midst.

"The buffalo," said Bap huskily, "sometime she is not so stupid."

In their enthusiasm they wasted upward of a month's supply of their precious ammunition, knocking down wolves as long as the ghostly forms could be made out in the gathering darkness.

Late that night Bap suddenly sat up in his blankets and stared through the darkness at Matt. "The hunt she make Bap forget how he have feel for the many days." He chuckled. "We waste very much powder." He laughed with deep satisfaction. "Most all the time you think first. But this time you think so late as Bap. Sometime you are able to have the feeling that is foolish. That is good."

A moment later his breathing announced his contented sleep.

## CHAPTER XV

REACHING the Platte was an event even more significant than their first buffalo kill. Not many men had come so far. Few indeed had ventured beyond to brave the terrors of the Sioux country above. Even here at the Platte many new dangers confronted the trader. The region was a notable center of population, not only of buffalo and beaver, those two staple products of the fur trade, but of the Indians who hunted them. But it was also a dangerous center, because each Indian nation, while occasionally eager to trade, was much more eager to prevent trade with its rivals.

Matt studied the rough map he had drawn in St. Louis, based on information he had gathered from old traders. Here, as on the lower Missouri, the increased ferocity of



intertribal wars following the introduction of firearms had caused the various nations to move their towns away from the river. The Oto town stood on the south bank of the Platte, a long day's journey to the west. The same town sheltered the poor remnant of the once mighty Missouri, reduced to the fragment of a nation by smallpox and war. Another day's journey to the west the larger Pawnee towns were strung along the Platte, the Loup, and the Republican. To the north, beyond Blackbird's famous hill, lay the Omaha town, the first Indian village near the river. In the rich valleys to the east dwelt the Iowa. And to the north and the northeast ranged the southern marches of the great Sioux empire that stretched from the upper Missouri to the Mississippi.

Matt folded the map and looked at Bap.

"We go on, eh?" said Bap grinning.

"And keep on going," said Matt.

The Platte, wide, shallow, amazingly fast, struck the Missouri with a wild impact. Its swifter current barricaded the greater one with immense shoals and bars of sand and silt and thrust the main stream against the eastern shore. With difficulty they worked their canoe over and around these shoals and pushed on into the upper river.

From here northward the Missouri current was slower and less impeded by floating trees, snags, and rafts of fallen timber than below the riotous Platte. But the advantage of easier navigation was more than outweighed by the increased Indian menace. On the lower Missouri the occasional appearance of a Sioux raiding party could be expected. From the Platte north to the Aricara country the appearance of Sioux on the bank was, sooner or later, a certainty. The Sioux were occasionally willing to deal with St. Louis traders for goods to supply their own needs, but were inexorably opposed to traders proceeding on up the river to carry guns and ammunition to the Indian nations to the north who were the Sioux' traditional enemies. Lewis and Clark had been able to continue northward the year

before, according to the winter dispatches they had sent back from the Mandan country, only by a determined show of arms in the hands of their disciplined force of more than thirty men.

Matt and Bap moved even more warily, if that were possible, than they had so far. They confined their necessary hunting as well as their camping to islands in midstream. They watched for frightened game, that sure sign that man had recently passed. They constantly scanned the horizon for smudges of smoke to indicate the prairie fires that Sioux war parties, engaged in tormenting Oto or Omaha, delighted to set to flaunt a success or to dismay an intended victim.

The second day they passed Council Bluffs where the year before Lewis and Clark had summoned the Oto and the Missouri to conference. The sixth day they sighted Blackbird's Hill with the cairn of stones on the crest to mark the tomb of the notorious Omaha chief in the cave below, where his corpse rested astride his favorite war horse. They paused in a fringe of reeds to scrutinize the river and shores ahead, then drove their canoe hard across the stretch of open water.

These occasional dashes beyond the easy reach of cover were the most perilous moments of their voyage. But the river scene remained deserted except for the waterfowl. A solitary old gull, outdistanced by its more vigorous north-bound companions, gravely eyed their passing from its post on a bit of floating driftwood. Fleets of half-grown goslings, not yet feathered enough to fly, made way casually for the canoe's passage and then followed curiously in its wake. The grown geese, molting at this season and equally unable to fly, were also unafraid and inquisitive. The canoemen worked their way toward the west bank, studying the shore before them. Wood duck, more timid than the geese, rose quacking from the river, while their water-bound young trailed along the surface behind their elders in frantic splashing agitation.

Beyond Blackbird's Hill, on the edge of the plains, lay

the Omaha town. For sixty days and seven hundred miles Matt and Bap had sighted no other human being. Now, instead of bending every effort to avoiding Indians, it was their purpose to seek them out. They had a mission to perform at the Omaha town.

Of all the offspring Hipolite had been placed in a potential position to beget during his sojourn among the Indian nations, he had acknowledged but one as for certain his own. This one was an Omaha boy, now ten years old, who had been conceived during a brief period when Hipolite had been the favorite of Blackbird and, considering the fear with which the redoubtable chief was regarded, Hipolite could not reasonably question the mother's faithfulness and his consequent paternity. While still an infant, this boy had suffered the loss of a hand in the course of a Sioux raid. Hipolite remembered him with a certain dry sympathy, if not with affection. At any rate he had purchased a very large horse pistol in St. Louis, powerful enough to bring down a buffalo at short range and a weapon that could be used by a one-handed hunter, as a rifle could not, and had commissioned Matt and Bap to deliver his offering.

They hid the canoe in the willows and themselves hid in the vicinity to watch for an hour to make certain that no Indian hunter or fisherman had chanced to observe their arrival and been moved to make a stealthy seizure of the prize upon the departure of the owners.

Crossing the wide bottom dotted with ponds and groves of trees through which the river meandered, they scaled the bluffs and struck the well-beaten path that led to the Omaha town.

Long before they reached the town they knew it was deserted. There was no trace of smoke in the clear air. Along the path the raspberry vines were weighted down by ripe fruit in unplucked profusion. Game gave every evidence of having long been undisturbed. Bear and deer, ordinarily much scarcer this far upriver than in the more heavily forested areas below, were feeding in plain view. A herd of

elk was browsing in the gardens in the very outskirts of town.

They were not altogether surprised to find the place deserted. It was an Omaha custom, Hipolite had explained, to devote the early summer, while their crops were ripening, to hunting the buffalo in the Great Plains to the west. This was an undertaking requiring the co-operation of all the able-bodied. The hostility of their neighbors, perpetual on the part of the Sioux and occasional on the part of the Oto and the Pawnee, made it unsafe to leave the infirm, the very young, and the very old behind, so the entire nation departed.

The deserted town was desolate and dismal. The Omaha had sought a change of luck by moving to it from their old town after a smallpox scourge three years before and a Sioux raid two years before had cost the nation more than half its number. Few families had so far taken the trouble to erect the substantial earth houses that were the characteristic permanent dwellings of the Missouri tribes. Most were mere wicker-and-skin hovels. The women had not even had the heart to plant extensively; their gardens and corn patches were scanty and weed-choked. The one evidence that the people considered this a town to which they intended to return was the bundles of brush blocking the doorways to prevent wolves from getting at their few possessions.

Bap was not at loss for means to fulfill their mission. On the medicine pole before the council house there hung, among other trophies, a white shield. On this shield Bap sketched with a charred stick the figure of Hipolite presenting the pistol to the boy. The drawing was crude, but the identities of the two figures unmistakable, the great one with the black forked beard, the small one with the missing hand. To the shield Bap tied the pistol. Hipolite's offering, hung on the sacred medicine pole, was as safely delivered as if placed in the boy's eager grasp.

## CHAPTER XVI

THERE were acres of pelicans gathered on the sandspit in mid-stream, dozing in the sun, preening their unprepossessing plumage, or, with their grotesquely ugly heads together, seeming to be exchanging gossip of their extensive travels, which annually ranged from the tropical shores of the two Floridas to the mountainous headwaters of the Missouri. Matt and Bap were prepared for the spectacle, since for the last three miles the surface of the river had been covered with great patches of feathers shed by the molting birds.

All morning there had been signs of Sioux hunters in the region. They had seen a herd of buffalo stampeding over a hill to the east. An elk with an arrow sticking in its flank had come down to the river to drink. Twice they had seen smudges of smoke in the distance. They had no idea of the country ahead. They had no way of knowing what bend might disclose an encampment of the wandering Sioux on the very shore. Therefore they were reluctant to disturb the immense colony of nodding pelicans. They paused in the lee of an island to take stock of their dilemma. If startled, the thousands of birds would erupt into the sky in a vast, circling beacon certain to advertise to sharp-eyed observers for miles around the fact someone was passing along the river.

They studied the east bank. The thickly wooded bottom stretched away a half-mile to the nearest open bluffs. It seemed the lesser of two evils to avoid alarming the pelicans by skirting this shore, since the Sioux ordinarily kept clear of country they could not easily traverse mounted and therefore were not to be expected lurking in these woods. At best travel on the Missouri presented a choice of risks.

Working along this shore enabled them to pass the peli-

cans without disturbance but committed them to a narrow eastern channel, separated from the main river by a file of small islands connected by shallows and sandspits. After several miles the last of these islands proved to be continuous, its wooded bulk rising to shut off completely any view of the river. The current in the channel they were following became imperceptible. Ahead of them a long narrow reed-bordered lagoon stretched northward as far as they could see.

They had strayed into a former channel, abandoned in more recent years by the unruly river, and the Missouri swung wide somewhere to the westward. Returning to the point of the last island, they dragged their canoe across the sandspit so that they might re-embark on the main river. Before starting on, Matt paused, disregarding Bap's amused scorn, to take time to smooth the wide track the dragged canoe had made in the soft sand.

"Might as well leave the canoe itself out in the open as a trail like that," argued Matt. "Anybody could see it from any bluff for miles around."

Bap glanced around at the distant high, weather-carved bluffs lining both sides of the Missouri's flat, wooded bottom. "Maybe they have see already," he said, shrugging. "If so we will soon know. But if they only see after we are gone it is not our dog they will kick." The canoe launched again, Bap devoted one more breath to expanding his own theory. "Maybe something bad happen soon. Maybe only after long time. But no matter how much we think—what happen can be something we have not think."

The westward bend of the river they had surmised proved to be a great, nearly complete circle, swinging away for more than ten miles before returning almost to the upper end of the lagoon, where the combination of a landslide and a huge *embarras* had deflected the current some years before. On account of this deflection the river had cut to the foot of the western bluffs and the flank of the *embarras* had further narrowed the channel so that it was necessary for them to

pass within a hundred yards of this open high ground on the left. They gathered their strength to run the dangerous passage at top speed.

After all their forethought and precaution, when the blow was struck it came without warning. The silence was first pierced by the brief, sharp scream of a war whistle. Immediately thereafter the yellow bluff was alive with naked, blackened Sioux horsemen, brandishing trade muskets, feather-bedecked lances, and zebra-striped shields. With the headlong bravado of expert horsemen they plunged their horses down the steep slope and belly-deep into the river. Their descent was accompanied by a stunning din of whoops, yells, whistles, gunshots, and the peculiarly deafening clatter of war rattles. The attackers were a war party, already en route upon some iniquitous project, and they had greeted with instant delight the chance appearance of the heavily laden and undermanned traders' canoe.

Had the Sioux war leader restrained his impatience one more half-minute, the canoemen's chance to retreat would have been cut off and they would have had no recourse other than to paddle docilely ashore to accept whatever fate suited their captors. But as it was they were some fifty yards short of the point where the mounted warriors were rocketing into the river. They spun their canoe about, dug their paddles deep, and drove back downstream. They were still within close range and for another moment were subjected to a hail of bullets and arrows shot after them by the disappointed Sioux. The rearing horses disturbed the warriors' aim, never too good with guns under the most favorable circumstances, but lead thudded into the canoe and frothed in the water alongside and a dozen arrows struck quivering in the bales of trade goods.

With the speed of the current added to their furious paddling, they soon drew out of range. Matt glanced over his shoulder at Bap, who grinned back at him reassuringly, and from Bap to the Sioux milling about in the shallows and the bluffs along the river. Two seasoned paddlers could drive a

canoe with the current at a very rapid rate indeed, but not at a rate for the first few miles at least, to match the pace of a running horse. The Sioux, if they made the effort, could outrun them, either to subject them to a constant running fire or to cut them off somewhere downstream where an island or an *embarras* narrowed the channel. Matt's second glance at the bluffs gave him some comfort. The bluffs were intersected at frequent intervals with gullies the pursuers would have to circle. This handicap might enable the canoe-men to keep ahead until the Indians' horses tired. They still had a chance. He snatched another glance back at the Sioux.

He was astonished by what he saw. They were swimming their horses to the east bank. For a second he thought they had abandoned any idea of pursuit. Then he realized how much more serious was the threat of this maneuver. The canoe must follow the great ten-mile bend of the river. The Sioux were cutting across the neck of land to the foot of the bend, a distance, even after allowing for rounding the lagoon, of not more than three miles, and there was good firm footing for their horses on the level prairies. It was not only still a race but one with all the odds against the pursued.

Matt picked up and lengthened his stroke, throwing every ounce of his weight and strength into each thrust of the paddle. Working downstream with the help of the Missouri current, boatmen expected ordinarily to average from eight to ten miles an hour. Matt hoped that with their present exertion they were making eighteen or twenty. He speculated on the rate at which the Sioux horsemen were making their three miles. At the end of their run it would cost them added time to force their way from the eastern bluffs across the wooded bottom to the margin of the river and to swim their horses to the midstream islands. There was no way to compute the respective chances. He gave up speculation and concentrated all his thoughts as well as all his energy on running their own race.

They were within a mile of the foot of the bend. In a



matter of minutes they would burst out upon the head of the three-mile-long straight reach of the river that led past the string of islands to the pelican roost. The second they came out upon this open water they would see whether they had won or lost the race.

Suddenly the canoe began to veer wildly. The stern paddle had ceased to function. Matt looked back. Bap was face down in the canoe. From his right arm blood spurted rhythmically.

Matt let the canoe drift and crawled back to the stern. A jagged lump of lead from a trade musket had ploughed through the muscles of Bap's upper arm. It had not been a serious wound when first incurred. But Bap had continued to throw his waning strength into his paddle. The exertion had served literally to pump the blood from his body. He was as gray as a dead man.

Matt hastily knotted a thong above the wound to stop the bleeding. Bap was still breathing, but not again today or, with the most fortunate recovery, for many days thereafter was his drained body likely to recapture the vitality to walk or to paddle.

Matt, kneeling beside Bap in the drifting canoe, endeavored desperately to think rationally. With his one paddle he could not drive the heavily laden canoe a mile an hour upstream against the current. It did not even occur to him to jettison their precious cargo. To seek refuge ashore seemed equally profitless, for he would be obliged to carry Bap on his back wherever he tried to flee. The Sioux had surely won the race to the narrows below, but to run their blockade seemed still their only chance, however slender. Matt returned to his paddle, straightened the canoe, and threw his remaining strength into his final effort.

When he shot out into the open at the foot of the bend he as suddenly swerved to the shelter of a clump of alders on the nearer bank. For the Sioux were not ranged, as he had expected them, on the banks and the island at the head

of the reach, but were galloping furiously downstream along the crest of the eastern bluffs. Matt was completely mystified until he saw the pelicans.

Thousands of them had risen from their sandbar three miles downriver to whirl and circle in a vast dim cloud against the sky. There was no knowing what had chanced to disturb them. But the Sioux, riding on the bluffs, had detected the movement and had assumed that the canoe, traveling faster than they had calculated, had been the cause of it. They were now in pursuit of their illusion. It might be a half-hour before, more enraged than ever, they would beat back along both banks of the river, with a hundred pairs of keen eyes alert for any sign or track of their intended victims.

Matt was thinking more clearly now. He was not thinking merely in places in which he might hope to conceal Bap and himself. His mind searched for some device by which he might preserve their whole expedition, the canoe and the cargo as well as their lives. He recalled the lagoon.

Dust cloaked the rearmost of the Indian horsemen on the distant bluffs. With a frantic burst of exertion he drove the canoe across the river to the sandspit connecting the most northerly island with the new east bank of the river—the same sandspit across which they had dragged the canoe before in order to regain the main river. The task that then had cost the two of them a struggle was now almost unendurable for one, and that one already on the verge of exhaustion. He did not wish to take time to unload part of the cargo, for the bare sandspit was visible from the bluffs and might at any moment be sighted by some straggling or early-returning Sioux. He threw his weight against the weight of the canoe with sinew-wrenching jerks until he had edged it inch by inch over the bar and into the slack water of the old channel beyond. Before re-embarking he crawled back on his hands and knees, controlling his impatience while he smoothed the sand and again removed every trace of the portage.

He had barely the remaining strength to climb into the canoe and to lift the paddle, but he forced himself to continue more than a mile up the lagoon before he turned sharply into the reeds that bordered its western margin. Getting out into the warm, knee-deep water, he pulled the canoe after him, taking care to bend or bruise the reeds as little as possible. The one-time river bottom, stretching along the western flank of the lagoon, was now a wide marsh webbed with slack-water streams and ponds and dotted with little wooded islands.

Matt threaded his way through this maze, pulling the canoe after him, keeping to aisles where he was well screened by the tall rushes and reeds, each step as he lifted a foot from the muddy bottom and forced it forward through the water requiring a distinct and painful effort. Waterfowl rose to circle and scream, but not, he hoped, high enough in the air to attract attention on the distant bluffs. Once, when in crossing a minor channel the water became shoulder-deep, the effort seemed for a moment more than he could make. Finally, when through a gap in the reeds he saw that he had reached a section of the marsh shielded by a long, narrow island well wooded by oak and sycamore from the view of anyone on the lagoon or the nearer eastern bluffs, he began to think of a place to hide and rest.

Before him a belt of wild-rose thicket replaced the endless belts of reeds. Above the rose vines spread a dark green dome of cedar, roofing one of the little islands that dotted the marsh. His fatigue-blurred mind considered this prospect with a flash of childish cunning. An Indian might be attracted to investigate a thicket of raspberry, currant, or wild plum, if only for the sake of snatching a mouthful of fruit in passing, but would be much less likely to penetrate the uninviting, useless recesses of a rose thicket. Matt lifted the overhanging fringe of rose vines, found the solid ground of the island's margin, and with one last effort dragged the canoe ashore until the vines had closed over and behind it.

Pausing only to make sure that Bap's bleeding had not recommenced, he fell face downward among the briars.

For an hour he lay prone, drawing great sobbing breaths, moving only to relieve the recurring fatigue pains that knotted his cramped muscles. The cry of a whippoorwill aroused him. Evening shadows were lengthening, and he realized that if he were to inspect their island haven while there was still light to see, he must be about it.

Despite the agony of his exhaustion, his first stumbling inspection stirred him pleurably. Whatever its other virtues, the island was a delight to the eye. The great cedars rose in majestic columns to support the dense green canopy formed by their wide-spreading interlaced tops, giving to the center of the island the appearance of some vast shadowed temple. Not more than two hundred paces in diameter, the isle was completely ringed at the water's edge by the wild-rose thickets, so that prowling enemies, whether near or far, could catch no glimpse of the interior unless they landed to explore. To north and south other islands connected with this one by reed-lined, knee-deep shallows, offering in case of threat sheltered escape routes in either direction. As if by design, on the shores of the cedar island at both of these points of entrance and exit lay the bleached skeletons of fallen oaks, their roots imbedded in the shallows and their tops extending beyond the rose thickets, making it possible to move readily from the smooth cedar-needle carpet of the island's interior into the water without leaving the trace of a footprint. Had he searched for days, a more perfectly devised seclusion could hardly have been expected than this one that chance had offered.

To the northwest stretched the open water of a deeper pond. In the fading light the still sheen of its gleaming surface was broken by the ripples of rising fish. Bap, if he lived, would presently need to be fed often and well to restore his strength. Game was their one resource, but to hunt involved the sound of gunshots, a prohibitive risk for days

to come. The taking of fish, however, could be a sufficiently noiseless accomplishment.

He returned to move Bap to a more comfortable bed of cedar boughs and covered him with a blanket. His pulse and breath rate were slow but encouragingly regular. Matt stood upright against a tree, forcing himself to stay awake for another hour.

When it was quite dark he waded beyond the reeds to the edge of the pond and, using a hand line, cast a hook to which he had tied a bit of feather as a lure. It had barely struck the water before a big bass swirled upward to take it with a violent lunge. The cool dark water became alive with gliding, darting, leaping forms. For the moment Matt forgot his weariness. Three perch, another bass, two small white catfish, a giant pike, were added to his string.

A quarter of an hour later he started back over the fallen oak with half a hundredweight of fish slung over his shoulder to reassure him that their hiding place was stocked with more than they could eat for days to come and to prove that a limitless abundance waited always within reach. When he dropped the still twitching fish to the ground beside Bap's bed, they gleamed with a faint phosphorescence in the black darkness of the cedar grove as the last reminder of his success. As if finally released by this assurance, his weariness flooded over him. He himself slumped down over the fish, falling instantly to sleep with his head pillowed on these chill scaly symbols of wilderness plenty.

## CHAPTER XVII

MATT was awakened late the next morning by a muskrat nibbling at his store of fish. When he moved, the muskrat, astonished, stared at him in marked displeasure before retreating with a certain dignity to his more natural range in the marsh. Bap's eyes were open and watching.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" demanded Matt, springing up to examine Bap.

"You do not feel when the rat he eat your ear," whispered Bap. He paused, puzzled to find his voice so weak, then went on. "If the buffalo he step on you you not feel him. You sleep good."

Bap had not the strength to lift his head but his eyes were bright and his skin cool. In the clean air of these solitudes a wound either killed or healed without the delay of complications.

"I've always known you were a fool," scolded Matt, giving angry voice to his immense relief. "But this time you outdid yourself. Why didn't you say you'd been hit? I suppose you thought it was a good idea to drain all your blood into the Missouri. You very nearly killed yourself."

Bap grinned cheerfully. "Nobody they get killed." His glance rested on Matt's drawn and haggard face. "Even you do not kill yourself bringing us here." He looked around at the stately red columns of the cedars, bathed in the dim green radiance that filtered through from the sunlit world without. "This she is very good place." His gaze wandered to the pile of fish. "She rain fish here, eh?"

"I'll fix you something to eat," Matt said. But first he made a quick circuit of the island to look over the marsh. There was no sign of the Sioux, even on the more distant bluffs to the southeast and northeast. Every pond and channel of the old river bottom was alive with waterfowl. The goslings and ducklings were learning to fly. Though but early August, the birds were restless and noisy, already prompted by the first dim stirring of the instinct to begin their great southward journey. Were the Sioux to approach the marsh from any direction, the whole region would erupt in raucous clamor. The island could have been no more safely protected against unexpected alarm by the sentinels and videttes of a numerous army.

He built a fire of dry cedar knots and splinters. The fuel

burned with a clear hot flame and what little smoke there was drifted away to be dissipated among the thick overhanging branches of the cedar grove. He boiled a pot of fish until the resulting soup was as thick as gruel. Bap drank two cups of this with interest and went back to sleep.

Toward noon there was a single distant gunshot from somewhere beyond the low hills that intervened between the marsh and the new channel of the river in its great bend to the west. An hour later Matt saw several spurts of dust on the same hills directly to the west. Late in the afternoon a smoke signal appeared on the horizon very far to the northwest. The Sioux were evidently pressing the search northward along both banks of the river. Tomorrow, baffled by the mysterious disappearance of the canoe and its crew, they would surely tire. There was reason to hope they would not return.

He woke Bap to give him two more cups of broth, ate a whole broiled bass himself, and went to sleep, feeling in nearly as much need of rest as he had the night before.

The next day he began an exploration of their little world of marsh and ponds and streams and lakes and persisted until he knew every reed-shielded shallow that could be waded, every route by which to move unseen from island to island. Most of the other islands were garnished with more useful thickets than their own rose hedge; plums, cherries, hazelnuts, raspberries, and grapes had attracted game in plenty into the marsh. Deer and elk had worn inter-island game trails, bears lolled in the berry patches, flocks of prairie hen and turkeys settled in and out of the tangles of fallen trees.

Matt had included an Osage bow and quiver of arrows among their equipment, having foreseen that the time might come, as it assuredly had now, when they might wish to hunt without the clamor of gunshots. He was not very adept at first, but the game here was unwary and after many trials he became sufficiently skillful to add a luxurious variety of

meat to their original diet of fish. Each day Bap was more ravenously hungry than the day before, and presently he was able to sit up for as much as an hour at a time.

The sixth day Matt's exploration penetrated to the edge of the western hills, where he came upon a little stream obstructed by a dozen beaver dams. The beaver had obviously never been trapped or hunted, for they showed no fear at his appearance. In broad daylight they emerged from the underwater entrances to their houses to swim about placidly in their ponds, to sun themselves on the banks, and to go about their daily business of cutting trees for food supply and dam repair.

For some time Matt watched these activities with interest. In spite of all he had been told by experienced trappers, he had never clearly understood the function of the beaver pond. He saw now that by damming the stream the beaver was able to maintain the water level at exactly the point needed to cover the entrance to the house in which it lived, warm and dry, on shelves above the water, and where it could carry on its domestic life in peace and safety. The pond provided the added service of a means of transportation enabling it to float and tow through the water to the door of its house the heavy branches and cuttings of the trees it had felled and upon which it depended for its winter food supply when it was frozen in.

His observation of the beaver colony brought Matt to a sudden decision. With the passing of his first relief that Bap was to recover Matt had fretted with impatience over the time they were losing. Bap would certainly not be strong enough to travel before October, and then it would be too late to reach the Aricara or the Mandan this season. In any event, they would be obliged to winter somewhere along the river. He decided, therefore, they might as well winter here, where they were already so well situated, and where, by devoting the fall and spring trapping seasons to collecting beaver pelts, they might yet save their year from becoming a total loss.



Having determined to make this their permanent establishment for the Winter, Matt set about its development with relentless energy. On the next island to the south there was a slight rise where the soil was well drained. Here he spread trade blankets on the ground so that his movements and activities would leave no mark on the surface when his task was completed. He cut a hole, carefully preserving the sod on a blanket, and extended the hole to a depth of six feet, carrying off in a blanket every particle of the earth removed and throwing it into the nearest pond. Lining the excavation with cedar boughs, he placed in it their bales of trade goods and covered them with dried elkskins. When the sod had been replaced, he watered the surface thoroughly to kill the scent, which might otherwise attract wolves to dig, straightened every blade of grass, scattered leaves and cedar needles to conform to the appearance of the ground in the vicinity, and withdrew, carrying his covering blankets with him. The keenest eye, he decided, could not have detected any clue to the existence of the cache. Now, if they were alarmed—and discovery by wandering Indian hunters was always a possibility—he and Bap could flee unburdened, to return at their leisure to recover the store of trade goods upon which their fortunes so much depended.

Next he built a cabin in their grove. The beautiful white-veined, violet-colored cedar split cleanly and was a continuing pleasure to work. He took pains to make their winter quarters as well joined and tight as a ship's cabin. Bap, now able to walk but not to be of much help, got in his way, derided his perpetual energy, and marveled at the care he lavished upon each detail. When the stone fireplace and the clay chimney had been completed and earth piled deep against the walls and on the roof, they had a winter dwelling snug against the most extreme cold.

One more preparation for winter absorbed Matt. The waterfowl were already leaving for the south and when the marsh froze, ground game might likewise leave. He had no wish to be subjected to the necessity of making long hunting

trips in midwinter, leaving the inevitable betraying tracks in the snow. He smoked yards of venison, elk meat, dozens of prairie hens and turkeys, rendered skins of bear's oil, and filled other skins with nuts and berries imbedded in goose fat. There was sufficient to satisfy even Bap's extraordinary appetite.

The nights turned cold. The sky was filled with the long streamers of southbound geese and ducks. Of a morning, paper-thin ice crinkled on the still water at the base of reeds. The time had come for which all Matt's former labors had been but the preliminary preparation. The beaver had put on its winter coat, suddenly assuming that value which led men into the wilderness.

Beaver-trapping as it had been described to Matt was a peculiar art. A first beaver had to be captured in order to procure the bait with which to trap the others. Matt's accuracy with the bow was still far from certain. The beaver he shot was only wounded and managed to escape into the pond. After that the whole colony remained in a state of alarm and he was unable to get within bowshot. He was forced to risk a gunshot in order to kill one from a distance.

From the glands of this one he extracted the singularly pungent castoreum with which to lure his fellows to destruction. The steel trap was set in three or four inches of water at the edge of a stream or pond and the castoreum smeared on a twig suspended in the air over it. Attracted by the smell, the beaver coming to investigate reared up in the shallows to sniff at the twig and stepped into the trap. In his initial struggle to escape, he ordinarily sought deep water and was drowned almost at once.

Matt returned to his traps the next day with some misgiving. He had followed carefully all the precepts of beaver lore expounded by old trappers at St. Charles and St. Louis, but he had little confidence that the wily and sagacious animal could be so readily taken. To his astonished delight, however, he had made a clean sweep. Every trap had captured its prize.

That night by the fire in the cabin he and Bap lavished happily painstaking care on the cleaning and dressing of the skins. Fortune loomed immediately before them.

"Of course we can't expect to catch eight beaver every day," admitted Matt. "After we've trapped a few days they'll get worried and be harder to catch—maybe. But the way they go for that castor we'd ought to average five a day. The ponds may not freeze too hard to trap for another sixty days—but let's say it's only forty. That's two hundred skins. The spring hunt ought to be at least as good. That's another two hundred. Now let's say they run only, say sixty per cent prime beaver. Anyway, the very least we can expect—allowing for spoilage and everything—is four dollars a skin. That's sixteen hundred dollars. And we haven't yet touched our trade goods."

Bap's mind turned from marveling at Matt's mathematical facility to pleased contemplation of their prospects. "We will be rich," he agreed. "When we get back in St. Charles people will be glad to see us."

"This is no time to talk about getting back to St. Charles." Matt rose and strode restlessly back and forth. "We'll cache our beaver here, where we can pick it up later. Then we'll take our trade goods to the Mandan. We'll be like an army that has bases of supply strung out behind it. We'll have the Adam goods in Chouteau's warehouse in St. Louis, this beaver catch here, and our trade goods at the Mandan towns. We can strike out for the mountains knowing that we're protected, that no matter what happens—and we're bound to run into more bad luck—we'll have something to fall back on. So we can keep on going. And this beaver catch means even this winter isn't a dead loss. Of course when the weather freezes up tight there won't be much we can do and we'll lose some time then."

"That will be very bad for you," said Bap. "Maybe when the snow she is six feet deep there will come one day you do not work."

Matt ignored Bap's sarcasm. Stirred by the prospect of

the coming year's achievement, he rebelled at the thought of inaction. "We can't squat here for three months accomplishing nothing," he declared. Suddenly the antidote for idleness occurred to him. "We'd planned on wintering with the Mandan and taking advantage of the time to pick up some acquaintance with Indian languages. You can't set out to trade among the Indians without being able to talk to them. When you have to depend on an interpreter you never know where you stand. Well, we can still spend the winter studying Indian languages. We can hire an Omaha—most of them know several dialects—to winter with us."

For a second Bap stared. Then he sprang up in excited approval. "That is one fine idea. Tomorrow we will go to the Omaha town."

"Tomorrow *you* will go to the Omaha town. I have to stay here to trap. I can't fool away the best part of the fall hunt. I'll put you across the river and you can cut down the west bank on foot. You're perfectly able to walk and your arm's not too stiff to shoot a gun if you have to. On foot you can take care of yourself all right."

Bap put up no argument whatever. He gave to Matt's suggestion that he go alone an even more delightful approval than he had to the initial proposal.

The next day they opened the cache to remove trade goods to finance Bap's embassy, and the next night Matt paddled him down the lagoon and across the river to the west bank. He counseled Bap to waste no more time than necessary, but had few fears for his safety. Traveling afoot and alone, an armed man who kept his wits about him should have no trouble avoiding danger as long as he took advantage of the wooded cover along the banks of the Missouri.

Matt returned to his trapping. By exerting himself to the limit of his energy he could handle a string of twelve traps. On good days this meant he spent many hours of the night cleaning and dressing skins. There were other days when the catch was no more than one or two. As with fishing,

the catch depended on the weather, on the variable temperament of the victims, on the phases of the moon, and on factors so complex that their significance added up to no clearer answer than sheer luck.

The day Matt decided it was reasonable to begin to expect Bap's return came and passed. There followed a whole week, a second and a third, without sign of him. Matt's anxiety grew, but there was nothing he could do. To attempt to look for him along the route to the Omaha town might merely mean they would miss each other and be more widely separated than before. Now, at least the location of one of them was known to the other.

The days grew shorter but the winter held off. The pleasant haze of a belated Indian summer persisted through the third week. But the warmth of the next morning's sun had chilled by mid-forenoon and the temperature began to drop so fast that ice was forming on the beaver ponds by noon. A gale whipping out of the darkening northwest gave promise of the winter's first blizzard.

It was already too cold to skin his beaver catch beside the pond at the trap lines without risking frostbite. Matt picked up his traps, which formed a considerable burden when added to six beaver, and staggered homeward, thankful the wind was at his back. The first stinging pellets of snow were flying with the gale. As he waded the shallows from island to island his leggings became encased with ice from the knees down. He was half-frozen by the time he plodded along the fallen oak and dropped down into the welcome comparative shelter of the cedar grove.

But all concern for cold and weariness fled when he caught a glimpse of the gleam of light around the edges of the elk skin hanging in the cabin doorway. Bap was back. Matt began to run, his heart pounding with thanksgiving. He dumped his load of traps and beaver, swept aside the curtain, and leaped within. Here he came to a sudden stand—stupefied.

Bap sat grinning on his bunk. He had brought back not one Omaha but two. And both were young women.

"With these," Bap said cheerfully, indicating the two girls, "you will learn Indian talk the more fast."

The two girls were not bad-looking even by white standards. They were dressed in their best, evidently for Matt's first inspection, their soft white doeskin garments colorfully beaded and quilled. There was an appearance of well-scrubbed cleanliness about their persons and their neatly tied hair that could probably be ascribed to Bap's influence. Bap required women in whom he had even the most momentary interest to take scrupulous care with their toilet.

One of the girls was a trifle plump, with a round, good-humored face, a frequent sunny smile, and an evident eagerness to please. The other was taller and more slender, with strong black brows, a determined tilt to her chin, and an air of almost sulky reserve.

"This one," said Bap, indicating the plump one, "is Mademoiselle Bending Reed. The other she is Mademoiselle Mountain Cherry. Bap he pick not bad, eh?"

Matt felt no hint of the familiar rush of anger over this latest example of Bap's unparalleled foolishness. Instead he felt an immense relief that the situation was one about which he could do nothing and with regard to which there was no choice or decision for him to make. No element of morals, ethics, personal dignity, or common sense entered into it. There was the mere flagrant fact that the girls were here and here to stay. They could not be returned home now. Travel by water was impossible with the river frozen and by land foolhardy with the Sioux so likely to pick up their tracks in the snow. There was no escape from the conclusion that these simple but infinitely interesting creatures were to be their cabin companions for the winter.

Behind him the elkskin whipped against his legs, emphasizing the contrast between the darkness and cold without and the light and warmth within. He moved forward into the pleasant warmth and began sturdily to task Bap with his

extravagance, his tardy return, his failure to foresee the drain on their winter food supply, his general foolishness, and finally, even with an uncritical selection. Only this last thrust punctured Bap's self-satisfaction, as Matt had known it would.

"Among all the Omaha they are the best," Bap cried. He began earnestly to point out for Matt's benefit the girls' obvious virtues, with detailed reference to their dispositions, shapeliness, complexions, manners, health.

Matt listened coldly. The fiction must be maintained that the adventure was entirely Bap's responsibility. He was waiting for Bap to become sufficiently excited to make the grand gesture of pressing upon him his choice of the two girls. He had already come to the conclusion that he preferred the slender one with the sulky eyes.

The Indian girls began to be disturbed by the evident difference of opinion between the white men. They could guess from Bap's tone and Matt's expression that their presence had occasioned it. Bending Reed stared at Matt, her good-natured smile fading. Mountain Cherry became openly indignant. She spoke harshly, interrupting Bap's dissertation.

"What did she say?" demanded Matt.

"She say she never come if she know she is not welcome."

This was not quite the impression Matt had been striving to make. "I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings," he said.

Bap looked hard at Matt and then seemed suddenly to comprehend. He nodded wisely and sympathetically. "Bap he is your friend," was his consoling reassurance. "He will make sure the women they make you no trouble." He spoke to the girls. They ranged themselves beside him on his side of the fire and looked back at Matt with puzzled antipathy. "They will stay all the time here by Bap where they have not get in your way."

Matt for the moment could think of no way, without an entire loss of dignity, to clear up the misunderstanding. Bap turned away at once, appearing to consider the problem solved and in need of no further consideration. He began to

talk to the girls as well as he could in their language and in a moment Bending Reed was giggling. Mountain Cherry remained more reserved, but she too seemed to relax somewhat.

Bap sat down on his bunk and stretched out his legs. The girls instantly became his handmaidens. They removed his wet footgear, dried his feet, drew on warmed moccasins, helped him out of his damp mackinaw, placed a roll of blankets at his back. These services were not performed ingratiatingly or provocatively, but as a matter of course in the fulfillment of an Indian woman's normal domestic duties, in routine recognition of the prerogative of the male upon his return from the rigors of war or the chase. Matt, trying hard to show neither open interest nor unnatural disinterest in Bap's situation, sat down and began to strip off his own ice-encrusted leggings.

The girls took the kettle from the fire, spooned a bark dish full of boiled meat, placed it on Bap's knees, and stood aside, watching attentively for any further indication of his wishes. Bap glanced across at Matt and made an amiable suggestion. "You are hungry, no? Better eat now. The Indian women they will not eat before the men in the lodge they have finish."

Matt helped himself and retreated to his bunk with his dish. He was hungry, but had become so exasperated that the food had no taste for him. Across the way the two girls were squatted at Bap's feet. By now he had Bending Reed laughing happily and even Mountain Cherry no longer frowned. From time to time he leaned over to feed each from his own spoon.

Matt seethed with the growing realization of his own ineptness. He had not wanted Bap to guess how quickly he had become reconciled to the presence of the girls. And as a result he had made a situation that could have been simple and easy into one which was becoming more difficult with each passing moment. There seemed no way out now other



than to admit himself a suitor for the favor that earlier would have been his without any negotiation whatever.

Mountain Cherry filled Bap's pipe. Bending Reed ran to bring a coal to light it, and Bap leaned back, puffing contentedly. He patted the bunk and the girls took up positions on either side of him. They fell into a low-voiced conversation punctuated by Bap's chuckles and Bending Reed's giggles.

Matt made his eating last as long as possible, though he had long since lost all appetite. Finally he cleaned and put away his dish, went to the door to look out at the weather, searched long for his pipe, paused to scrape out the bowl at the fire, filled and lighted it with care, after which there was no recourse other than to return to sit on his bunk and to confront the glances of the three across from him. At this last and most critical moment inspiration came to him.

"Which of the two would you guess is the brighter?" he asked Bap.

Bap surveyed his two companions. "Bending Reed she manage the most easy," he decided. "But Mountain Cherry she is the more bright."

"Long's we got them here to teach us the language," suggested Matt, "we might as well start. Get her to tell me some Omaha words."

Bap spoke to Mountain Cherry. Sullenly she rose and walked around to Matt's side of the fire. He gestured for her to sit on the bunk but she shook her head and remained standing, impassive, distant. He held up his pipe and looked at her questioningly.

"*Ninibah*," she said.

He repeated the word after her. She nodded. He pointed to the ax. "*Masoppa*." The fire. "*Pade*." The gun. "*Vahutan*." This, when he repeated the word after her, he purposely mispronounced, so that she would be required at least to take sufficient notice of him to correct him. She corrected him, though quite impersonally.

"You learn fast," remarked Bap.

Matt ignored him. He indicated himself. The word for man was "*nuh*." And for woman, "*wahuh*." Each word was announced by Mountain Cherry without inflection. When he looked at her she continued to look past him. He tried to gain her more interested participation by shifting the lesson to more personal objects. He pointed to her hair. "*Paha*." Her eye. "*Ishta*." Her ear. "*Nitta*." Her mouth. "*Ihha*." His regard strayed to her figure. She did not move or change expression. But with Bap watching Matt lost his courage. He pointed instead to his own arm. "*Ahschih*." His leg. "*Jaga*." His foot. "*Se*."

Made more and more self-conscious by Bap's intent attention, Matt began to repeat the words he had already learned, striving to add emphasis to the impression that the occasion was nothing more to him than a language lesson.

"You lose very much time," chided Bap. "Bap he will tell you the word for sleep—*ajan*. And the word for yes—that is *ohhoh*."

Matt glared across at Bap and then turned apologetically to Mountain Cherry. She was sinking to a seat on the edge of the bunk beside him. And for the first time she was smiling.

## CHAPTER XVIII

EACH day of that Cedar Island wintering seemed to Matt pleasingly interminable. He awoke slowly and lazily, sensing, while thinking was yet a part of dreaming, the fact that there was no occasion to wake, nevertheless finding a perpetual fresh surprise in the realization that he need not feel the familiar instant urge to be up and about a new day's labors.

The world without was heavy with the hush of utter silence. Snow, drifting across the open lakes and ponds, had lodged against the island and sifted through the cedars to cover the cabin so thickly and softly that the wildest gale was

inaudible to those within. Their winter home was a snug, warm, hidden sanctuary from cold, from danger, from concern, even from thought.

He stretched and yawned luxuriously, speculating first on his ability to sleep another hour, then on what he wanted for breakfast, and finally on the possibility that there might be a new and continuing snowfall to cover his tracks, thus permitting him to hunt beyond the center of the marsh without leaving a fatal trail leading back to their island citadel.

Mountain Cherry, crouched over the rekindled fire covertly watched him, eager to anticipate whether his mood favored her starting his breakfast or returning to his couch.

Bending Reed enjoyed the privilege of Bap's later rising, which permitted her to lie longer abed, but she paid for the luxury by the agony of apprehension with which she lay tremblingly awake awaiting the first sign of his arousing. Bap's first move, as usual, was to bound to the door to inspect the weather. Bending Reed sat up, clutching the blankets about her, shivering with suspense and horror as she listened for the grunt or the shout that would announce the verdict. When the weather was less boisterous than a downright blizzard and the temperature above twenty below, Bap's ritualistic instinct for cleanliness insisted upon morning baths for the cabin's inmates, a panic-inspiring project in which he took the most active part and over all features of which he delighted to preside. This morning a bright sun gleamed on the snowbank at the end of the tunnel that pierced the great drift before the door, and Bap's immediate shout broke stridently upon the cabin's peace and comfort.

Stripping off their garments, the men drove their companions through the tunnel, tossed them into the snowbank, plunged in after them, scrubbed themselves and the protesting girls with snow, and cavorted amid the stinging ice crystals like South Sea Islanders sporting in the tropic surf, until Bending Reed and Mountain Cherry, at length escaping, fled, rosy and tingling, back to the warmth of the cabin.

This wild burst of activity was Bap's sole exertion for the

day. Thereafter he seldom ventured from bed except to eat or to tease the women. Most of the time he slept—the complete, relaxed sleep of an animal or a child, during which he appeared to store up the energy he spent so excessively through other seasons of the year.

Matt grudgingly enjoyed the novelty of his winter laziness, but he lacked Bap's gift for endless sleep. By no device or delay could the time required to rise, to bathe, and to breakfast be extended beyond midmorning. After that he went out to inspect, repair, and extend his labyrinth of tunnels through the snowdrifts heaped across the island. Though the chance of discovery by the Sioux was infinitely remote, Matt had developed his tunnel system until it would have been possible to flee from their cabin in any direction without once coming to the surface until they reached the second island away.

One tunnel led to a snow cave at the end of the pond. Here he broke the new ice that had formed during the night and reopened his fishing hole. Presently a dozen pike and bass were gasping on the snow shelf beside him. Next he gathered the rabbits and prairie hens from his snares in the dense thickets of the second island north. This fish and game he added to their frozen food supply, which was stacked like cordwood in the escape tunnels. Finally as night approached he cut firewood, and returned with some faint assurance that he had earned the cabin's welcome comfort.

Bap rose and sat with him as they smoked and watched complacently the unhurried preparation of their main meal of the day. The variety and plenty of their food store inspired Mountain Cherry and Bending Reed to undertake involved and interesting complexities of Indian cooking—stewing smoked turkey breasts with dried huckleberries, frying pike fillets in deep goose fat flavored with wild mint, broiling cakes of pounded wild cherry crusted with acorn meal in leek-scented bear's grease. To them the preparation of abundant food was the infinitely important rite it can be only to those who have frequently known famine.

The fire filled the cabin with the warm glow of light and shadow, wreathed by the smoke from the men's pipes. The two girls had removed their clothing, as was the Indian woman's custom when engaged in domestic tasks in the privacy of her own lodge, and their smooth brown bodies assumed unself-consciously graceful attitudes as they hovered over their cooking. The air steamed pleasantly with the rich savor of cooking meat, the pungent tang of tobacco, and the permeating fragrance of sweet grass, the ever-present Indian perfume.

The two men basked in the grateful recognition of their good fortune. Every immediate prospect was sensuously pleasing. Presently they would eat extremely well, lingering over the process because there was always more. Then their couches awaited with the ultimate gratification to be accepted as naturally and regularly, under the circumstances of their cabin hibernation, as had been the satisfaction of their appetite for food. Time seemed to stand still on a moment of contentment.

But spring brought an end to this indolence and peace. With the first thaw Matt was out with the beaver traps and Bap, remonstrating loudly if cheerfully, was forced to follow. The beaver were scarcer and warier than the autumn before. A succession of freezes and thaws made the worst type of trapping weather, requiring them to wade thigh-deep in slush, rotting ice, and snow water to tend to their trap lines. By the hardest work from dawn to dusk they were able to average barely more than a pelt a day.

Meanwhile the cabin was no longer the cozy, warming haven to which they could happily contemplate retiring at the end of the day's frigid labors, but had become instead the very abode of discontent and strife. Their formerly docile and gracious companions had turned suddenly into embittered shrews, quarreling with each other, scolding the men, and enlarging upon their extreme distaste for every feature of their common existence.

To the two girls the coming of spring meant an approach-

ing separation from their lovers, and to this inevitable conclusion to the winter idyl they objected violently. They complained, neglected their work, lamented their fate, and wept as they referred with increasing frequency to the depth of their unappreciated attachment to their white protectors. This appeal to sentiment troubled Matt most of all, for it made him feel vaguely ashamed as well as ridiculous.

"They knew it was to be only for the winter," he protested. "They knew when they came nobody had any other idea."

"The woman," observed Bap, "she is never ready to let go."

When the ice went out of the Missouri and the moment to return the women to the Omaha village had finally arrived, the situation became even more complicated. They hysterically refused to get into the canoe. They sat stubbornly on the ground. They spoke darkly of hanging themselves. Bap favored leaving them on Cedar Island, but Matt felt it a duty to make sure of their safe return to their homes.

In this emergency Bap had one of his ready ideas born of his wide experience with the unpredictable sex. In their hearing he proposed that he and Matt go on an overnight hunting trip to give the women time to think things over. Before setting out he surreptitiously opened the cache of trade goods on the southern island, the mere existence of which had been kept a carefully guarded secret from their cabin mates, and removed articles to the value of fifty dollars or so, carefully selecting baubles and trinkets carefully calculated to strike the particular fancy of the Indian belle. These, together with the paddles for the second canoe in which Bap had originally brought the girls from the Omaha town, he hid on Cedar Island near the cabin where they could certainly be found.

"We promise to give them this much they go right on crying," Bap explained. Association with Matt was depriving Bap's English of some of its original flavor. "They think we give them more maybe. But when they see a

chance to steal what they think we do not want them to have—that will seem to them very different. They will take the stuff and run. Then we will have no more worries about them.”

Matt was willing to try anything that might rid them of the women whose society he could not now imagine having enjoyed during the winter. And with the river open he was burning with impatience to resume their interrupted journey.

They paddled leisurely up the lagoon, discovered there was a possible portage from the head of the lagoon to the main river that would save them, when they started north with their full cargo, from taking the circuitous route around the big bend, they spent the night, and returned to the cabin late the next afternoon.

To their delight, it was deserted. The Omaha canoe was gone. The trifling cache of goods they had intended to be found had been found. Mountain Cherry and Bending Reed had taken the bait and departed. They were no longer the simple grieving creatures whose laments grated on the masculine conscience, but ungrateful thieves who deserved no further consideration.

“Like I say,” crowed Bap, “when the Indian he see a chance to steal he cannot help himself.” He blew a kiss out at the channel stretching through the reeds toward the lagoon. “Adieu, Mountain Cherry. Adieu, Bending Reed. We see you again the year the buffalo grow wings.”

Matt was looking at the ground where the Omaha canoe had been shoved off. Embedded in the mud was a single gleaming bright-blue bead.

“You didn’t leave them any chief’s beads, did you?” he demanded.

“Do you think Bap then he is a fool?” shouted Bap angrily.

Matt did not answer. The two men’s eyes slowly met in the full horror of mutual comprehension. They turned together and ran.

The bank on the southern island where their main stock of trade goods had been so carefully buried now presented a yawning, empty hole, the area about it littered with the remnants of the cedar-bough lining and elkskin cover to evidence the venomous energy with which the women had raided the cache. Working with the fury of rage and despair, they had taken not only the bait, which had served only to stir them to smell out the main store, but also the entire capital upon which the expedition depended.

"I cover him up good," expostulated Bap. "Every stick. Every leaf. The miserable bitches they have the eye of the lynx and the nose of the weasel." He paused to consider and added softly, "The women they must get very mad with us."

Matt stared at the empty hole. So many plans, so carefully laid, so easily disrupted. The Aricara, the Mandan, the upper reaches of the Missouri, the Shining Mountains, until a moment ago so near, no more than a summer's journey, had suddenly faded into an immense distance.

## CHAPTER XIX

**T**O Little Owl, Hipolite's Omaha son, the most important events had become very nearly commonplace. It had not always been so. During most of his short life he had remained very far removed from important affairs. He had had to attach importance, instead, to his simplest needs, such as his next meal or a dry place to sleep.

Little Owl had been born into a communal society in which the pattern of daily living was founded upon the division of labor and the sharing of food within family relationships. He had no family. It was a primitive society in which the crippled, the sickly, the aged, all who were too weak to keep up, were considered better off if left in the trail behind to die quickly. The loss of his hand had placed him among the weakest. He had barely survived, on the very



fringe of existence, learning to compete with the dogs for scraps, to dodge blows when he crept into lodges for shelter, to court the capricious generosity of drunkards, to levy petty blackmail on erring wives. He had always been alone. Even the boys of his own age ignored him, except when with callous cunning they invited his participation in sports requiring the use of two hands.

All this had been changed by the pistol. No chief or warrior had ever possessed so unique a weapon. It outranked immediately the fusils, trade muskets, and worn-out Kentucky rifles treasured by the leading men of the tribe. It made him welcome in the most respected lodges. Boys many years older sought his friendship and counsel. He was now the first to be invited by the girls to share in the favorite sport of the Omaha adolescents, the traditional, complexly organized game of mock housekeeping and mock warmaking that culminated in the abduction of a selected girl by a favored boy. He had moved at one bound from last to first in social esteem.

This new importance attached to him continued, giving new meaning to his every thought and act. He could hardly wait to display his prowess when the tribe's winter buffalo hunt would give him his opportunity to kill his first buffalo. He practiced constantly with the uncharged pistol, aimed and snapped it at imagined game a hundred times a day, loaded and unloaded it, cleaned and polished it, anointed it with bear's oil, and never loosed it from his grasp except to place it beneath his head when he slept.

But, when at last there came the opportunity to kill his first buffalo and he pointed his pistol with a pounding heart—nothing happened. He was certain the care he had lavished upon the weapon had protected it from any material injury. Magic alone could account for the failure. The pistol was a strange and unusual weapon. It was no more than natural that it could be discharged only under the influence of some obscure white man's incantation unknown to him.

This fearful catastrophe served only to sharpen his already sharp wit. He solemnly explained to his hunting companions that he had been advised in a dream that the first kill of the prized pistol must be a white buffalo. He selected the white buffalo not only because it was the most sacred of all animals but also because it was the rarest. It appeared, according to tradition, only once or twice in a generation. His fellow Omahas accepted his dream revelation with awed respect.

Little Owl waited impatiently for spring and the return of the white traders to restore the Omaha girls to their families. As the ambassadors who had delivered the pistol they could be expected to know the charm that governed it. He schemed to attach himself to their service, to find opportunities to win their confidence. Given the opportunity of daily contact with them, he was confident his capacity for close observation would discover their secret.

When in the spring the traders reappeared, not calm and friendly and ready to sit and talk around a cooking fire, but livid with rage and loud with sternest accusations, Little Owl was elated. It was an important moment in Omaha history. The Omaha, weakened by their recent tribal misfortunes, were eager to court the favor of white traders, from whom they needed supplies and weapons, and the more responsible chiefs were deeply troubled by this scandal that might for seasons to come prejudice traders against them. But to Little Owl the moment was even more important.

He stayed in the background while he observed and formed conclusions. He saw the blaze in Bap's eyes as he taxed his former Omaha friends with complicity. He saw the difficulty with which Matt bent his pride to stand before the Omaha council with the formal complaint: "Your women took our goods." He listened to the horrified and sympathetic protestations of the Omaha elders, their earnest promises that when the women returned they would be punished in any way their white benefactors desired and the goods

returned to their rightful owners. He saw that the white men believed none of these protestations and promises.

That night Little Owl crept secretly to their lodge. It was a situation in which the truth best served his purpose. "The women have not come back," he told the white men. "What they told you at the council was true. When you came to-day—that was the first anyone among the Omaha knew the women had stolen your goods."

"Then where are they now?" asked Bap.

"They hide—somewhere in the woods along the river."

"How do you know that?" demanded Matt.

"Because that is what I would do," Little Owl explained simply. "There was nothing else for the women to do. Consider. They take your goods. They are rich. Never have two women been so rich. But they do not dare come home. They know you will come here. They know the chiefs will give your goods back to you. The women are afraid. So they hide. They will wait until you go away."

"We will not go away," said Bap. "We'll stay until we find them."

Little Owl shook his head. "It will do no good to try to find them," he said. "There are many places to hide among the marshes and woods in the river bottom. The two women know how to hide. They will live on roots and seeds. They will not need to move to hunt or fish. They will lie in the rushes as still as the young fawn. When they know you look for them they will only creep further away."

"Makes sense," grunted Matt.

Little Owl saw with pleasure that he was beginning to win their confidence. "Wait," he advised. "Talk loud to the council every day so that you do not seem to wait. But wait a little to see what happens and I will tell you whatever it is."

They followed his advice, even though developments took a turn that was almost intolerably exasperating to them. For every young unmarried Omaha man, as well as a number of married schemers, began to hunt and fish assiduously

in the bottom country, thus contriving to search the area for twenty miles in either direction. They went out in pairs, friends teaming up with friends, or pooling skills and talents, as when Hairy Horn, who was old, ugly, and misshapen but a famous hunter reputed to be able to follow a trail by scent at night, joined forces with Bear's Head, who was young, handsome, and acknowledged to have been invariably successful at seduction. Matt and Bap were angrily inclined to join this furtive, scrambling search, but Little Owl succeeded in dissuading them.

"Many men are looking for the women," Little Owl pointed out. "Let them do the looking for you. When they find the women, then will be the time for you to take back your own."

Meanwhile, Little Owl had remained primarily concerned with his own design. But he had made little progress. Though he had been accepted as a valued friend he still feared to ask what magic was required to discharge his pistol. This special magic would never be readily revealed, since no more than an Indian medicine man could these superior beings be expected to share an understanding of their secret mysteries with a boy. His one chance to penetrate this mystery was to keep his eyes open and his ears quick to detect exactly the attitudes they assumed and the manners they observed when they picked up or laid down a rifle, the precise words they muttered when a ramrod stuck or a leaning piece fell down.

Unfortunately there was no opportunity to observe the heart of the mystery. The white men frequently cleaned, oiled, and recharged their weapons, but during their residence in the Omaha town there was no single occasion for them to discharge a firearm and thus for Little Owl to attend the ritual they observed at this climactic moment. Therefore he was fully as impatient as they for the river-bottom search to bear fruit.

At last the long-awaited moment for action came. Little Owl rushed in in the night to inform the white men that

Hairy Horn and Bear's Head had succeeded in locating the secret lair of the women and in winning their favor. The happy quartet, widely circling the Omaha town, was already en route to the Oto town to visit the family of Hairy Horn's first wife, and incidentally to display their newly gained riches. Little Owl accompanied the pursuit, eagerly anticipating the shooting that would occur when the white men overtook the fugitives and which he would be in a position to observe at close quarters.

By noon they had picked up the trail. By the second hour of the second day they came upon the spot where the quarry, unaware of any pursuit, had camped a few miles short of the Oto town, to feast leisurely upon an elk and to bedeck themselves in the best of their new finery to make a grand entrance.

Unfortunately for the hopes of the white men and Little Owl alike, they also here came upon the bodies of Hairy Horn and Bear's Head. The successful suitors had been murdered and the assailants had carried off both women and loot. Some guilty care had been taken to obliterate traces that might indicate the identity of the attackers, but Little Owl presently found the clear print of a Pawnee moccasin. Some inquisitive Pawnee party had stumbled upon the honeymooners' camp and, though officially the Pawnee were at peace with the Omaha, had basely yielded to the lure of so much wealth. An hour's circling search located the cottonwood grove in which the attackers had hobbled their horses and from which they had set out in the direction of the Pawnee towns on the Platte.

Little Owl was discouraged, but then to his surprise he saw that the white men's determination was in no way abated. They apparently saw nothing incongruous in continuing the pursuit of their goods, even though now they, numbering but two, were trudging along on foot after a considerable body of mounted Pawnee, following a trail that could only lead to a town inhabited by thousands of other Pawnee.

There was need of maintaining under these new circumstances their continuing need of his services. When at length they had come out on a hilltop where they could see the Grand Pawnee town in the distance Little Owl was ready with a sage proposal.

"Before you talk to the Pawnee it would be better for you to know what kind of a story the women have told and what kind of people have your goods," he said. "Let me go in first. I will find out what I can and come back to tell you."

This proposal was so sensible that the white men restrained their impatience and awaited the results of his investigation. He went in at dusk and drifted from one cooking fire to the next, ostensibly begging but listening carefully to Pawnee gossip. He was in no personal danger, because the Omaha frequently paid visits to the more powerful and prosperous Pawnee.

However, his guarded inquiries presently involved him in a most unwelcome complication. He attracted the attention of one Joe Thorn, another white trader, a resident among the Pawnee and possessed of much influence among them. No explanation could be sufficiently evasive to throw off this man who was as wise in the ways of Little Owl's race as he was in those of his own. Joe Thorn insisted upon being taken out to meet Little Owl's white companions.

## CHAPTER XX

**J**OE THORN at sixty had been a legendary character for thirty years. Though few who lived under roofs had ever actually seen him in the flesh, few names along the frontier were as familiar as his. Half the bizarre wilderness exploits that had become stories worth repeating—bear-wrestling, panther-huggings, feats of strength, endurance and marksmanship, marvelous escapes from captivity, gauntlet, and burning stake—were commonly ascribed to him. Many of these adventures he had indeed experienced. His memory

of them went back to Braddock's defeat, and among his youthful achievements was a journey alone through four hundred miles of savage-infested wilderness to bring the first news of Pontiac's siege of Detroit.

There were few later instances of his conscious public service or even of his association with people who lived in ordered communities. He preferred the ease and freedom of the Indian camp where, as a resident trader, he could be an important and dignified citizen, of whom nevertheless little was expected and upon whom few responsibilities descended. For this personal ease and freedom he was ready to risk any labor, hardship, or hazard. This life he had chosen and in which, unlike men less ready to pay for their desires, he had persisted at whatever cost, kept him in the wilds well beyond the farthest frontier, ranging first across the Ohio, then the Wabash, then the Mississippi, and finally the Missouri, where he had lived for the past two years among the Pawnee.

Matt, who had heard often of Joe Thorn, was not prepared for the figure that appeared before him. The fabulous wilderness wanderer was a slight, spare man, graying, clean-shaven, smiling and mild-mannered. Aside from his moccasins there were in his dress none of those decorative and barbaric touches—necklaces, headbands, fringes, beaded designs—so much affected by most white men who lived among the Indians. He wore a very old and battered bell-crowned felt hat, a once black but now threadbare broadcloth coat, a faded flowered waistcoat, and much-patched woolen pantaloons. There was about him an air of a gentle, indigent, retired minister of the Gospel. He was unarmed except for a light fowling piece, which he handled absently, as a townsman might an umbrella.

"I'm Joe Thorn," he announced. He took it for granted his name was familiar. Then he said no more while he eyed Matt with reserve. When Matt spoke the old trader sighed with immediate relief.

"So you be an American. All the boy knew was one of

you was not a Frenchman. Took you for another of them Englishmen nosing around."

"Englishmen—way back here?" asked Matt.

"Ain't no country so far back an Englishman don't wind up in it. Specially if it's somebody else's back country."

"How do they get here?"

"From Prairie du Chien—through the Sioux country. The Sioux, they's so ornery they like Englishmen."

"They didn't like us," said Matt. He felt it wise to feel his way with care: A trader resident among the Pawnee might not sympathize too readily with rival traders come to claim that Pawnee had stolen their trade goods.

Joe Thorn was one who scorned dissimulation. "No matter who bothered you, it was the Pawnee who got your goods. Old Characteris' grandson Seroka was with the young men who made the grab." This friend of the Pawnee made no bones about admitting that the family of the most respected Pawnee chief was involved in the affair. "Seroka's a smart boy. Before coming in he traded off the two women to some Kansas hunters who'll likely sell them to the Osage, who are paying good prices for slaves. Might take you two three months to catch up with them, and I'd say not worth it. You won't be able to prove much by them. Nobody'll listen to what they say."

"You mean the Pawnee would turn over the stuff," asked Matt, "if we could prove it was ours?"

Joe Thorn pondered a moment. "The Pawnee like to cuddle traders, because they want more traders to come to them instead of their enemies. But it may take some proving. Young Seroka gave away half your goods to people in the right places. When you get up before the council to claim what's yours every chief you'll be talking to will have some of your property he'd rather count his than to believe your story. But come on—we'll see."

Matt accepted the invitation gladly. Joe saw his eagerness and wagged his head warningly.

"Don't get it into your head they'll hand you your prop-



erty just on my say-so. You'll have to catch your own horse, and it all depends on how you hold your mouth when you sneak up on the critter. All I can do is try to see you don't make no bad mistakes."

From a distance the rounded earthen houses of the Pawnee town looked like a collection of huge liver-tinted beehives. A nearer view disclosed many flashes and patches of color set against the dun background of the monotonous circular houses that rose without a change in appearance or texture from the hard-packed earth of the village streets. There were gaily decorated warriors' shields and medicine bags suspended in heraldic fashion before the doorways, innumerable scalps fluttering at the end of red sticks thrust into the mud walls, French, Spanish, and English flags, the gifts of designing and competing traders, waving over the council house.

The women were engaged in treating hides, bringing firewood, jerking meat, sewing, and other domestic tasks, the men in a violent game of ball on the hundred-and-fifty-yard-square ball ground at the edge of town, and none but the youngest children had even a curious glance for the visitors' arrival.

"Any other time was two white strangers to show up the whole town'd be falling over themselves to look you over," said Joe. "But word has got around about what you want. They're pretending they ain't even curious."

Matt had set out to be a trader. He was now confronted with the perpetual crisis that haunted the career of a trader. By the nature of the profession the trader must subject his person and his property to the overwhelmingly superior physical power of his Indian customers, depending solely on his own wit and spirit to achieve his purpose or even his survival. Matt's recent disgust with himself and his fortunes fell away, leaving him eager for the trial.

Joe's lodge, which was also his trading store, was kept neat and trim by his wives, two big, strong, exceptionally ugly middle-aged squaws.

"The kind I always pick," explained Joe. "When they're that homely they're more used to working, they don't visit around so much, they're grateful for whatever they get, and, come night, you can't see 'em anyway."

They were good cooks, as well. The men ate in silence, but afterward, when with pipes they leaned against the wicker backrests and stretched their feet to the fire, Joe disclosed a sheepish but persistent interest, curious in a lifelong wilderness wanderer, in his own country's affairs, and Matt was hard put to it to answer some of his offhand questions about Jefferson's policies and Hamilton's death and George Rogers Clark's health. Joe was particularly interested in the little Matt knew of Lieutenant Pike's journey up the Mississippi to remind the English that the Valley of the Mississippi was American territory as far as the river's headwaters, and to warn the English traders dealing with the Sioux at Prairie du Chien that they were trespassing on that territory.

"Young Wilkinson was here last summer on the same sort of business," said the old trader, thoughtfully eying the hole in the ceiling through which the smoke escaped. "He had a dozen ragged, good-for-nothing soldiers along with him, but he strutted around calling himself a Military Plenipotentiary. Only thing military about him was the fancy uniform he put on when he talked to the council. His soldiers got drunk and bothered the Pawnee girls and paid no more attention to their commanding officer than an Oto does to a flea. The Pawnee sized him up for a fool, took no stock in his claim his father was the commanding general of all the American armies in the West, and paid no attention to him either, even when he talked big about the Americans soon taking Mexico and expecting the Pawnee to be their allies."

Bap had squirmed around to avert his gaze from the painful sight of Joe's ugly wives beyond the fire, and he now dropped off to sleep. Matt was not much more interested. A year ago he would have been glad to spend a

night discussing a political question so engrossing. But now nothing was important to him except the recovery of his property and the resumption of his journey.

Joe made no further mention of this problem that night. It was not until late the next afternoon that he suggested Matt's first move. One of the official town criers was engaged to beat his drum through the streets, making formal announcement of the arrival of the distinguished white visitors, of the disaster that had befallen them, and of their expectation that the wise and generous Pawnee nation would decree justice and make restitution.

To this public appeal there was no response. Two long days passed during which Matt and Bap, their impatience mounting, remained inactive and unseen in the seclusion of Joe's lodge.

"You have to give 'em time to think," Joe counseled. "Indians like to think. A white man hears or sees something makes up his mind, jumps, yells, and does something about it. An Indian don't. He wants to go over it in his mind, counting the likely cost to him if he sets out to steal a horse or spend a winter trapping or cut his enemy's throat. He's generally wrong, but he likes to think it all out just the same."

The third day Iskatappe, a leading chief, dropped in to pay Joe a friendly visit. Iskatappe seemed surprised and pleased to encounter Joe's two guests, as if it had slipped his mind that they were in town, and chatted at some length with them about the weather, Joe's food, Matt's health, Bap's appetite, and the high price of tobacco. No mention was made of the lost property.

Thereafter on successive days other leading Pawnee paid visits, singly and in groups of two and three, all pleasantly interested in conversing with the white men. None made any reference to the purpose that had brought them among the Pawnee. Nothing was permitted to clash with good taste, good form, good feeling.

Finally Characteris himself came. He made no effort to be

polite or chatty. He was old and shrewd and tired. For an hour he sat contemplating the unbidden guests with a silent unblinking scrutiny. Then he came suddenly to the point. The goods in question had been taken from two Omaha, members of that rascally nation which two years before had descended to the ignominy of robbing Pawnee grain caches. To dispossess the two Omaha had been a normal act of war, as legitimate as stealing horses, in no sense a trespass against any white man, and in any event a matter involving none but the interests of Pawnee and Omaha. On what was the claim of the white men based? If a Pawnee's horse was taken by an Iowa and a Sioux succeeded in taking it from the Iowa, should the Pawnee go to the Sioux and expect the return of his horse?

Matt paid this question the tribute of five minutes' apparently intense thought before replying. "If your wife took your horse hunting without your knowledge and your good friend Joe Thorn took it from her, would you not expect him to return it to you?"

Characteris considered this version of the question while he slowly smoked three pipes. Unlike the Sioux, who were able to buy all the trade goods they could afford from the English, the Pawnee was but partially supplied, and must therefore as a national policy profess friendliness toward all white traders. Characteris rose, drawing his robe with dignity about his aging frame, and pronounced it a matter that could be determined only by a duly assembled council of all chiefs, which he would summon so that the white men could appear before it to plead their case. The gathering of the council would, however, of necessity be delayed by the imminent commencement of the annual corn festival, which for a time would require the nation's undivided attention.

Forced to witness the grotesque and yet poetic fantasy of the Pawnee crop-planting ceremonies, which centered around a stuffed bird considered a messenger from the Morning Star, and included strangely garbed processions, wild night-long dances, the display of mystic symbols and

elaborate rituals before varied shrines. Matt found himself intrigued in spite of his impatience, while Bap was fascinated by the sexual excesses that were an essential feature of the primitive fertility rites.

But on the third day Joe insisted on their accompanying him to search for some strayed horses in the Wolf River Hills. Joe thought it only sensible to prevent their witnessing the climax of the festival lest their natural reaction to it irreparably damage their standing before the Pawnee council. This, they learned only afterward, was the sacrifice of the young captive Kiowa maiden who had previously been feasted and feted and led innocently to consider herself the veritable queen of the occasion—by torturing her body with fire, piercing it with arrows, and drawing blood from it to anoint the hoes with which the crops would be tilled, the seed that was to be planted, and the fields in which they would grow, thus to assure under the benign light of the Morning Star a full and prosperous yield.

The white men returned from their aimless excursion to find the town weary and somnolent. It would be some days before the elders would apply themselves to the involved diplomatic and judicial problem of determining title to the disputed property. The day for the meeting had been twice set and twice postponed for trifling reasons before it was delayed indefinitely by the approach of an immense herd of buffalo, upon the hunting of which the entire Pawnee nation embarked.

Matt was beside himself with furious but impotent impatience. The summer was already well advanced and here he was squatting in a Pawnee mud house waiting for events over which he had no slightest control.

"That's not a bad sign—their putting it off so much," said Joe. "If they'd made up their minds to say no they'd have had the meeting and got it over with. But they're worried. Your chances are getting better."

The buffalo hunt continued with success and prosperity. The whole town was red with the garlands of meat and

white with the sheets of back fat, suspended from the drying scaffolds. Finally the last train of horses loaded with buffalo had trailed over the hills and people settled earnestly to glut themselves. After days of feasting at last the council was summoned.

The hereditary chiefs of the Pawnee, the several medicine men whose magic had currently proved successful in healing and forecasting, the leaders of the more important secret societies, certain old men whose experience and wisdom were generally acknowledged, and those leaders of war parties whose skill and reputation commanded respect and numerous followers, entered the council house in single file and seated themselves in the circle about the fire that constituted the council proper. Important warriors, men wealthy in horses and wives, and other generally influential citizens crowded into the space outside the circle to listen but to take no active part unless the judgment of the council ran scandalously counter to the public opinion of the Pawnee nation. The senior town crier harangued the waiting multitude in the street, exhorting them to give heed and to maintain silence and decorum. Characteris opened the meeting by lighting the ceremonial pipe, which all the members smoked in turn. The pipe was passed from hand to hand in the direction of the movement of the sun, always carefully upright, lest by presenting either bowl or stem first to his neighbor the eccentric one draw down ill fortune. Each man, before smoking, presented the stem to the sky and earth and to the east, the west, the north, and the south, to acknowledge the existence of the spirits dwelling in all quarters of the world. There ensued a long silence during which no man stirred or looked at his fellows. At length Joe nudged Matt to indicate that the time had come to have his say.

The long delay in summoning the council had armed Matt with a better understanding of the Pawnee point of view. He had observed much himself, had learned more from Bap, who had learned it from the confidences incident to a num-

ber of hair-raising amours with the younger wives of Pawnee chiefs, had drawn on the conclusions of Joe's long experience with these and other Indians, and had picked up most of all from Little Owl, who had drifted about the town to listen inconspicuously beside a hundred cooking fires. Matt felt that he knew the Pawnee hopes and fears. As a result he based his entire case on a single point.

"The Pawnee are a great nation," he began. The unhappy winter episode had at any rate given him a working command of the lower-Missouri dialects. "Their horses and mules cover the hills around their towns. The plains of their country are black with the buffalo so that the Pawnee people live in the midst of plenty. Their young men are brave and warlike, their chiefs wise and farseeing. The name Pawnee is known to the whole world. It is a name feared many days' ride to the north and to the south, the east and the west." He waited for the murmur of approbation to run through the assembly. The speaker was a supplicant who did well to recognize the stature of the Pawnee people.

"Now let us notice the Osage, the Kansas, the Iowa, the Sac and the Fox, even the Omaha, the Oto and the Missouri. None is so great as the Pawnee. But every one of these lesser nations lives nearer than the Pawnee to the American towns and storehouses. The Pawnee live at a great distance. It is easier for the American trader to carry to these others the axes, and lanceheads, and brass kettles, and red blankets, and guns, and gun-powder, that all Indians wisely wish to possess. American traders are eager to make the greater journey to bring their goods to the more powerful Pawnee nation, but they must be sure that when they come so far they will be received with friendliness—and with justice."

The council paid this opening statement the tribute of an hour's uneasy silence. At length Characteris rose to make the Pawnee reply.

"I am a very old man. All my life our people have welcomed traders because we valued their friendship as well as

their goods. It was the same in the time of my father and my grandfather. When my grandfather was yet a boy the first French traders came to us. They have been coming ever since. Many of them have lived among us. Many have become members of the Pawnee nation. We think of them as of our own blood. In the time of my father the Spanish came. Some came up the great river and some across the deserts from distant Mexico. They brought us goods that we needed. In my own time more than a few English traders have visited us. Their goods were good and they were cheap. We were glad to see the English traders because we knew their hearts must be with us. They had had to come through the country of the warlike Sioux, and the Sioux were not pleased that the English should pass by them and come to us. Still, the English came and brought us the flag that flies over this council house beside the flags of our friends the French and the Spanish. French, Spanish, and English traders have come and have been welcome. We should also welcome American traders. But in the time of my grandfather, my father, and myself only one American trader has come to live among us—the one who sits here among us today.” He indicated Joe Thorn. “He is a good man and our good friend, but he is the only one.”

Characteris sat down amid a chorus of approving grunts. Their chief had made an unexpectedly shrewd counter in pointing out the distinction that existed between traders of one white nationality and those of another.

Matt controlled his impatience until he had shown Characteris' views the respect of a quarter-hour's consideration. Then he resumed the presentation of his case.

“Since the year before last all traders who come to you are American. None may come except by American permission. It is the American flag that now flies at St. Louis and which alone should fly over your council house. From now on no one will be allowed to trade with any Indian nation unless he possesses an American license to trade. The two captains when they journeyed up the Missouri warned



all Indian nations that this was so, and ordered the English to stay out of American territory. Last year Lieutenant Pike went up the Mississippi to take the same message to the Sioux and to order the English from Prairie du Chien."

A murmur, half amused, half contemptuous, ran through the assembly. Characteris replied without the customary respectful pause.

"The two captains are gone—no man knows where. They were like a stone dropped into a pond. Even the ripples are seen no longer. And we have heard of Lieutenant Pike. He must be the brother of Lieutenant Wilkinson who was with us last summer and whose men did not look to us like soldiers. Pike is now with the Osage and we have heard he is on his way to visit us. He has come with fifteen men who walk. Even the Oto and the Missouri when they go to war or upon visits to other nations have horses to ride."

This was the deepest of Indian insults, since it was considered that men without horses were not only poor but cowards as well, else they would steal sufficient horses for their immediate needs.

Matt's heart began to beat hard. The issue now raised involved something more important than his personal property. Were he a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition itself and temporarily the spokesman for the two captains appearing before the council of the most distant tribe, he could not be more essentially the spokesman for his country than he was at this moment. His answer was a proud and violent warning.

"The Pawnee must live at a very great distance from other people that they have not heard what all the world knows. In the time of your grandfather all Americans lived on the shores of the distant Eastern Ocean. Since that time they have marched westward. Have the Pawnee heard of the Delaware, of the Ottawa, of the Iroquois, of the Shawnee, of the Wyandot, of the Miami? Ask those nations if the Americans walk or ride. The Americans moved over the eastern mountains and down the Ohio, making friends

of those who wished to be friends, driving before them those who chose to be enemies. Country that once was English is now American, that once was French is now American, that once was Spanish is now American. My people are now in St. Louis. This is my counsel, Pawnee: *Let us be friends.*"

Matt's declaration caused a sensation in the council. For two hours not a figure stirred. Then at a signal from Carcteris all rose and waited for the three white men to leave the council house. At the door the old chief took Matt's hand.

"Through the night we will hold your counsel close to our hearts, my friend. Tomorrow we will tell you what our hearts have decided."

"Not bad," approved Joe on the way back to the lodge. "A good stiff jolt like that—that's what they understand best."

"You should know him like I do," exulted Bap, clapping his hand on Matt's shoulder. "When he gets mad that is the time to look out."

"Tomorrow you will have your goods," Joe said. "Except for what their women are able to hide and pretend they can't find."

Matthew Morgan had set himself up in a moment of need to speak for his country. On the morrow, the answer came, not from the Pawnee council, but from far over the horizon and delivered with the voice and hand of once mighty Spain. Lieutenant Don Facundo Malgares came with the answer, riding at the head of 350 Spanish cavalry, 100 of them splendidly uniformed dragoons of the Spanish Regular Army. He bore with him orders from the Viceroy to reassert the centuries-old Spanish title to the territory between the Missouri and the Red rivers, to drive out or capture all American intruders of whatever character found in this area, to meet and destroy Lieutenant Pike's westbound expedition, or any other American military force encountered west of St. Louis, and, most important, by display of

Spain's military might to win as future Spanish allies the fierce Indian nations of the region. Spain had yielded grudgingly for centuries to encroachments in the colder climes of the North and the East, but was now making one last spasmodic effort to bar trespassers in the South and the West from the approaches to Mexico.

A Pawnee war party had encountered Malgares on the Arkansas. It came galloping in ahead to proclaim that the Spaniards were coming to demonstrate their special friendship for the Pawnee. The entire Pawnee population rushed out to welcome the glittering cavalcade as it descended the hills from the south, after a forced march of more than a thousand miles from faraway Chihuahua. The long column of Spanish troopers trotted through the streets of the Pawnee town, drawn sabers gleaming, flags flying, drums rolling, trumpets sounding, to camp with military precision on the ball ground. Here was a form of military power Indians could understand and appreciate and which delighted their martial hearts. They were stupefied by excitement and admiration.

Malgares' first act upon entering the Grand Pawnee town was to require the delivery to him as captives of all traders resident there without Spanish permit. This included every trader with the Pawnee, since none had ever heard of such a document.

The Pawnee sprang eagerly to obey, pouncing upon not only Matt, Bap, and Joe but also all the French traders, some of whom had lived among them for as many as fifteen or twenty years. The captives were bound like slaves and thrown down in a corner of the Spanish camp on the ball ground. Matt's speech of yesterday before the council seemed now no more effective than the cry of a child in the dark.

The captives, bound with wet rawhide and as helpless as so many trussed animals, writhed with impotent rage. Even Bap took no light view of their situation.

"Myself I speak the Spanish almost so good as I speak the

English," he complained. "I tell the Spanish captain I am like him a Spaniard. I tell him I am the good friend of M'sieu Delassus who was the last Spanish governor at St. Louis. But he only laugh."

"Me—I have been taken by French and English and by more fool Indians than I can name," grumbled Joe. "But I never figured I'd get so old and half-witted a parcel of Spaniards could kick me around."

Matt listened, half out of his mind, to the exulting Spanish trumpets and the frenzied Indian drums. It seemed incredible that this summer, which was to have witnessed his great achievement, was to end instead in one of those Chihuahua dungeons from which foreigners never returned.

## CHAPTER XXI

**L**ITTLE OWL had remained unimpressed by the Spanish entry. The Spaniards did not know the secret of the pistol. This was known to Matt and Bap alone. Therefore to Little Owl the captives remained more important than their captors. With all his natural cunning he set about a rescue.

Malgares kept his own men under stern control, but encouraged the Pawnee to celebrate the presentation to Caracateris of a Spanish royal commission to govern his nation hereafter in the name of the King of Spain. The stores of the traders had been confiscated by the Spaniards, and the whisky kegs were now broken open to add zest to the Indian merrymaking. Great fires were kindled in the streets to light the way for the throngs that surged back and forth between the square before the council house where they danced and the ball ground where they admired the Spanish soldiers and reviled the prisoners. Women and children rushed about singing and shrieking. Warriors mounted on their best horses and caparisoned in their finest equipment

galloped up and down. The sagest chiefs looked on, smilingly encouraging the demonstration, secure in the knowledge that they had chosen the side of the heavier artillery.

Suddenly, into the midst of this uproar catapulted Little Owl astride a young stallion apparently too much for him to manage. With Little Owl clinging to his mane, the colt, crazed by the fiery clamor about him, bucked, whirled, reared and kicked his way through the streets, scattering the celebrants, overturning shrines, adding the last touch of frenzy to the excitement. The Indian rude and ever ready sense of humor was tickled by the exhibition, and the wild progress of horse and boy was accompanied by by whoops of Pawnee laughter.

The plunging stallion at length invaded the Spanish camp, overrunning sentinels, trampling tents, disrupting horse lines, where the misadventure was greeted with somewhat less amusement. But when Little Owl was thrown off he contrived to be thrown among the bound captives. He somersaulted and rolled against Matt, thrust a knife under him and into the hands tied behind his back, and whispered a word into his ear before springing up to pursue the fleeing stallion into the darkness of the river bottom.

To the Spaniards, fatigued by their hard marches, rest presently became more attractive than the novelty of the Indian celebration and by midnight the camp had settled into repose. The energies of the Pawnee were concentrated upon the dance in town. Matt, working cautiously, severed his bonds with Little Owl's knife and then those of Bap and Joe. The three squirmed slowly away without exciting the suspicion of the nodding guards, crawled into the willows, and ran to the hill-top from which they had once dispatched Little Owl to spy for them.

The boy was waiting with horses. Matt and Bap engulfed him with their whispered gratitude and congratulations, but Joe peered at the horses in the darkness before nodding his grudging approval.

"The boy's got a fair eye," he admitted. "There ain't

four better horses you could steal out of the whole Pawnee herd."

The fugitives rode north until morning, through the following day, into the night, and until the horses were utterly exhausted. Equally worn out, the men slept until dawn and awoke famished. To their great satisfaction there was a herd of buffalo feeding on a neighboring hillside.

The one weapon possessed by the party was Little Owl's pistol. At last the moment for which he had labored so long had arrived. The great secret was now about to be revealed to him. Breathlessly he offered the pistol to Matt and crawled beside him as they crept up a gully toward the buffalo.

After a time Matt paused and reached for Little Owl's powder horn to recharge the pistol, in order to guard certainly against a misfire. Little Owl watched, wide-eyed and trembling, every movement of Matt's fingers, every expression on his face, at the same time listening closely for the muttered invocation he expected.

"Why, your damned trigger spring is unhinged!" exclaimed Matt, irritably jiggling the loose trigger.

Little Owl comprehended instantly. Shame overwhelmed him. He had followed and served the two white men all these dangerous and laborious months to gain information they would have volunteered without hesitation the first moment he had encountered them. The mysterious blight that had incapacitated his precious weapon had not been magic, but a mere mechanical defect that could have been rectified by the first drunken trader who visited the Omaha.

He concealed his immense chagrin. "It must have slipped when I fell from the horse in the Spanish camp."

"Maybe I can fix it," said Matt.

With the point of Little Owl's knife he opened the pistol lock, forced the spring into place, and reassembled the lock.

"Now it's as good as ever."

And so it proved. To Little Owl's stupendous satisfaction, the fine buffalo cow fell at his first shot.

Bap joined them to help butcher the animal. By the time they returned to camp Joe had a fire going. Each man cooked his meat and ate and cooked more and continued to eat. Little Owl was first to have his fill, and wandered down into the cottonwood grove where the horses were hobbled.

His way was clear before him. Nothing was to be gained by sharing longer the poor fortunes of these white men. On the other hand, there was the splendid opportunity to return to his rightful position among his own people, the distinguished possessor not only of the magnificent pistol but his own horse herd, stolen intrepidly from the Pawnee.

The new alarm among the buffalo, grazing beyond the cottonwoods, did not escape Joe's attention. The three men stared helplessly at Little Owl on his stallion driving the other horses before him over the crest of the ridge. There was no use attempting pursuit on foot, nothing left for them to do except to comment vigorously on the young rascal's incredible perfidy.

They were on the plains without arms and without horses, roughly a hundred miles from any one of the three nearest Indian towns, the Pawnee, the Oto, and the Omaha. Joe was for returning to the Pawnee. The Spanish would leave within the week, since they must start their long journey back to Mexico before winter overtook them on the plains, and once they had departed Joe was confident of being at least tolerated by the Pawnee. Bap favored calling on the Omaha to make what trouble they could for Little Owl.

"We've got more to figure out than what Indian town we'll crawl into," objected Matt. The anger in his voice commanded the others' attention. "Among us we've already managed to fool away the better part of a summer."

"I've managed to fool away the better part of fifty years," said Joe.

Bap laughed but Matt did not. His voice still had that

angry ring. "Last spring we started to go somewhere. Here we are more than a year later and we haven't got as far as we'd ought to have made the first month. We're worse off than that, because we've lost our outfit and we can't go on even now. Two whole years wasted. The only way we can get back any part of those years is to get our outfit together again." He eyed Joe with a strange disfavor. His whole instinct was to remain free and independent. It was awkward enough to have had to subject his freedom of movement and decision to the demands of Bap's companionship. But the urge to resume his interrupted journey overruled his reluctance.

"There's only one thing for us to do. That's to put our heads together and see what we think we can do—if each one of us does his share. So let's see what we've got and what we think we can get. Bap and I have some furs cached up by Cedar Island. In St. Louis they ought to be worth upwards of a thousand dollars. We've already got say half that much on deposit with Chouteau. Then there's the stuff the Pawnee hold. That's as much Joe's as it is ours, because we don't stand a ghost of a show to get any of it except by his help. Besides that there's Joe's credit with the Pawnee. Half the nation owes him for goods he's advanced them. This is what I'm getting around to. Each of us has something to offer. Each of us has something he can do. It looks to me as if we should join forces, work together, and share and share alike. That way, maybe we can make up for some of the time we've lost."

Joe's gentle smile beamed benevolently. "Suits me. Couple of strong young colts like you want to be partners with a useless old plug like me I ain't complaining."

The three men shook hands. Bap's enthusiasm overflowed. "Our own fur company—that is what we make," he proclaimed. "Matt he will tell us what to do, Joe he will tell us how to do it, and Bap he will do it."

"If we once get together what belongs to us and get ourselves organized, we *will* have our own fur company," said



Matt, still very serious. "Only thing is—Joe, Bap and I are of a mind to keep on going into new country until we've gone as far as we can get."

"Suits me," agreed Joe. "Like to see what I can myself before I get too old to get around."

"Then see how this strikes you," proposed Matt. "Somebody's got to get down to St. Louis right away to tell them what the Spaniards are doing, in case they haven't got wind of it down there yet. So Bap and I will pick up our Cedar Island pelts and get off for St. Louis as fast as we can. Next spring we'll come back upriver with the most practical outfit we can get together, pick you up, and keep going. Meanwhile, you go back to the Pawnee town. Your judgment on sizing up the risks is better than mine. But whether the Spaniards gobble up Pike or not, they'll have to be starting home. If they miss Pike, he'll be visiting the Pawnee himself, and though he'll probably look like small potatoes compared to that Spanish cavalry, still old Caracteris will remember how much nearer St. Louis is than Chihuahua and will show a little care about how he treats Americans. I don't think there's a chance they will turn our goods over to you. Not since the Spaniards stirred them up. But they might as a compromise agree to pay us the value of the goods in skins at some later date."

Joe nodded. "An Indian'll promise anything he doesn't have to pay right now."

"Then let's make that agreement with them. An agreement entered into freely by both sides will become a claim that we may someday be able to collect, and in any event it will be a simpler question to deal with later than a half-forgotten dispute over title to the property."

"Even when Matt gets mad he thinks," marveled Bap.

Joe nodded again. He seemed amazed, not so much by Matt's reasoning as by his own acquiescence. "Don't recollect ever before having anybody do the thinking for me. But he ain't making such a bad fist of it."

"If we're agreed, let's get started," said Matt.

They divided the remaining buffalo meat into portions for carrying.

"No need packing too much—it'll spoil before you can eat it." Now that the moment to separate had come Joe, who had spent a lifetime avoiding people, seemed to cast about for remarks to delay the parting. "See you come spring. I'll be right back where I was with the Pawnee. If the Spaniards don't come back by this time next year the Pawnee'll forget they was here. Indians can't remember how hungry they get of a winter long enough to lay up something to eat the next winter." He shook hands with them again. "If I do get my rifle back it won't be fit for a man to shoot. Indians surely can gum up a good gun. You might bring me a new one from St. Louis. I'm partial to a Ferree myself." He shook hands with each a third time. "You'll likely get hungry before you hit the Missouri. Keep an eye out for prairie-mice nests. In most every one you'll find a handful of wild beans and wild artichokes." They were actually leaving now and he had to raise his voice to make himself heard. "If you can't make it come spring, I'll look for you the next year."

## CHAPTER XXII

TRADITIONALLY, the Missouri swept returning wanderers swiftly homeward. It was as if the ease and the speed of the descent were a reward bestowed upon those who had contrived to survive the months and years they had spent in the upper wilds.

The southward and eastward swoop with a canoe-load of beaver turned Bap's thoughts to the welcome awaiting him in St. Charles. There would be bright eyes glad to see him. He could not understand Matt's dissatisfaction. It was true that they had not traveled as far upriver as they had planned. But next year they could try again. Meanwhile they were coming back with more furs than two men had often

gained in a single wintering, and that their first. There was what St. Charles considered a small fortune in the canoe. Enough to set a man up comfortably for life with house and garden, complete with cow and a pair of pigs—not that Bap was ready to set himself up in a house and garden. Still, his ability to do so would make the bright eyes brighter. There was one advantage, Bap was realizing, in being denied the woman he wanted most. It left him free to have fun with all the others.

But nothing about the all too swift descent lightened Matt's frown. To him, this was no more than a second retreat, a second failure, and he resented it more bitterly than he had the first. His dissatisfaction deepened when they began meeting the boats of traders outward-bound to establish winter trading contacts with the Indians upriver. Fourteen parties they encountered between the Platte and the Kansas alone. Never had so many men elected to try the river the same year.

It appeared that though Lewis and Clark, of whom there had been no word for nearly two years, had been given up for lost, their initial success in proceeding as far as the Mandan country had served to stimulate interest in the Missouri trade. Matt had thought of himself as one running far ahead of the crowd. Unless he made better progress than he had to date he would be hard put to catch up with it.

The meeting with Robert McClellan's party disturbed him most of all. McClellan was bound for the Aricara, many hundreds of miles farther upriver than Matt had attained before being turned back by the Sioux. He was a veteran trader with years of Mackinaw experience who was not accustomed to undertake ventures he could not accomplish. With him was Joseph Gravelines, the interpreter who had started with Lewis and Clark and had been sent back downriver by them two years before to escort an Aricara chief to Washington, to acquaint him, and through him his tribe, with the importance of the American nation. The chief had unfortunately died during his Washington

visit but Gravelines was returning with government presents, a message from the President of the United States to the Aricara, and instructions to learn what he could of the fate of the Lewis and Clark expedition. If Matt had not lost his goods at Cedar Island he might now be many months' journey upriver and be himself in a position to trace the expedition and possibly even to locate its remnants. He fell into a fit of depression so irritable that Bap did not venture to address him for two days.

Going upstream the traveler strained his eyes for the sight of the first buffalo. Coming down he watched for a glimpse of the first cow, that sure sign he was nearing the settlements. Bap made such a to-do over their first cow, a stray one mooing disconsolately in a pawpaw thicket, that he neglected his stern paddle, permitting the heavily laden canoe to run on a snag. It was necessary to beach the craft on the nearest island. By the time repairs had been completed it was too late to proceed and they decided to camp.

Bap strolled along the far shore of the island to try out the trade musket he had bought from one of the upriver parties they had encountered. The old musket misfired two out of three times and the third time shot so far to the left that it brought an element of genuine sport to his hunting. A brace of wild geese, heavy and fat at this time of the year, was more than he and Matt could eat before reaching their journey's end, but his interest in the gun's vagaries kept him shooting. Wild geese might prove an acceptable delicacy in St. Charles, where game was already getting scarcer, and he persisted until he had knocked down a couple of dozen.

Matt sat by the fire staring into the shadows upriver. The Missouri, darkening in the twilight, rolled on past him out of that far land, which twice had turned him back. The shadows wavered, flickered, shifted with the waves and the stir of the wind in the treetops, gathered, and took the shape of the varied images upon which his imagination had so often seized and which had for him now in retreat an allure more inviting than ever before. He saw the shaggy black

buffalo carcasses bobbing in the flood, the elfin deer dancing on the sandbar, the ghostly wolves circling the calf in the darkness, the wild Sioux warriors galloping on the cliffs, the sleek dark beaver gliding across the icy pond, the smooth bronze figures of Bending Reed and Mountain Cherry in the sensuous warmth of the cooking fire, the grave lined faces of the Pawnee elders in the council house.

As always, his imagination leaped to create other images, taking shape beyond these that had so far come within his remembered sight, other images that he had yet to see. Beyond the Omaha and the Pawnee and the Sioux he saw the fancied figures of the Aricara and the Mandan and the Cheyenne, beyond the fringes of the open country he had skirted he saw the limitless, teeming extent of the Great Plains, and beyond and above, immeasurably distant, he saw the soaring crystalline peaks of the Shining Mountains.

The shadows before him on the river became like an open gateway through which his imagination rushed into that far land. Suddenly from that open gateway there emerged, out of the imagined, infinite distances, new shadows, darting toward him, darkening, thickening, acquiring substance, escaping the glimmering realm of his imagination to become no longer shadows but objects as tangible and real as the river and the forest and the ground on which he sat. A canoe, another, a third and a fourth, took shape, each accompanied by the faint white splash of paddle strokes, the unmistakable swing of the paddlers' shoulders.

Matt leaped to his feet. These canoemen were not Indians but bearded and leather-clad white men. No such numerous company of traders was upriver to be returning at this season. The truth burst upon him dazzlingly and in an endeavor to express the tide of elation and thanksgiving that swept over him he began to jump up and down, to wave his arms, and to yell wildly. The dead had risen. Lewis and Clark had survived, no doubt triumphed, and were here before his eyes, sweeping downstream on the last lap of their return journey.

The column of canoes swerved shoreward toward the fire, and before it had occurred to Matt to leave off his insane shouting he was surrounded by the ragged and travel-worn heroes of the great adventure and the two young captains, to his delight recognizing him instantly, were embracing him.

"You're back," stammered Matt. "When nothing was heard from you for so long everybody thought you were lost."

"We weren't lost," drawled Lewis. "We were just slow."

Drouillard appeared, grinning, at Matt's elbow to launch into a long speech. "She is far—the Western Ocean."

Clark shook Matt's arm. "Even Drouillard has turned chatty. How can people smell roast goose and still talk so much?"

Bap ran to distribute his store of wild geese. Other fires sprang up in the dusk. The two captains squatted by Matt's. Matt noticed that Lewis settled down somewhat gingerly.

"He sits most as good as ever," observed Clark. "He got a bullet through his bottom back in the Blackfoot country."

"Blackfoot shoot him?" asked Matt.

"That's what he thought—at first," explained Clark. This did not seem to be Lewis's favorite topic. "But it was only one of his own men, Cruzatte, who took him for an elk in the willows."

"I suppose when a soldier is shot where I was shot," grumbled Lewis, "he can look forward the rest of his life to being discussed by others as if he were not present."

Matt began hastily to divide the goose. He was as excited as Little Owl had been waiting for his pistol to be shot. In the firelight the faces of the two captains showed lines of exposure and fatigue and hardship, but their eyes glowed with that inner peace known only by men who have fully achieved something upon which their hearts had been set. Whatever else should happen to them, this could never be taken from them.

They tore ravenously at the roast goose with hunting knives, fingers, and teeth.

"Maybe we've been slow," said Clark, "but we've come too fast the last three weeks to hunt enough to eat."

"For the better part of three years we ate so much wild goose we got so we wouldn't knock one over with a stick," said Lewis. "Must be getting near the settlements makes it taste so good again."

Matt forbore to ask questions, but he listened, tingling with anxiety to learn the details of their great journey, as the captains' conversation cast revealing shafts of light across the dark background of the years they had been lost to sight.

"You've heard of the white bears. They're not white, really—they're gray and streaked, sort of grizzled. Well, by the time you get within two or three hundred miles of the mountains these bears—some of 'em are bigger than an ox—they get thicker than prairie dogs. Sometimes they're a dozen of them in sight at once. You have to keep your eyes open when they're around. They think no more of going for a man than they do of stripping a current bush and they treat him the same way. . . . When the camas blooms in the spring a mountain meadow in the sun looks like a lake of blue fire. . . . So many salmon come up those Western rivers it looks like you could walk across on their backs. The salmon spoil the Indians, though. When the fish are running they're so easy to catch the savages eat themselves sick and then they starve the rest of the year.

"One thing puzzled us for days and still does. When we were getting near the mountains from this side we heard a rumble of explosions in the distance. Sounded exactly like heavy artillery fire. We heard it off and on for several days. But we never did figure out what caused it. . . . You've never seen beaver until you've seen them on the streams coming out of the mountains. Ponds end to end for miles. They've never been hunted. The beaver just sit out in the

open and gape at you. . . . The Indians of the Northwest coast go to sea in big painted wooden canoes with sixty to a hundred paddlemen. They're pretty tough sailors and think nothing of hunting whales. . . . The mountains are plenty rugged, and it took seventy miles hard going to get across just the main backbone of them. They're so high the snow and ice never melt up there and you can freeze to death in July."

Gradually as Matt listened, the astounding story took shape. It was one of extraordinary triumph. Since leaving the Mandan country the expedition had attained the extreme headwaters of the Missouri, scaled the snow-clad heights of the great mountain barrier, descended the legendary river of Oregon, wintered on the shores of the Western Ocean, and returned with a detailed report, accomplishing every purpose included in the President's instructions.

The black depression born of his dissatisfaction with his own efforts rolled back as Matt listened. He had once so eagerly identified himself with the great venture that it seemed now almost as if he had accompanied the two captains in fact instead of only in spirit. His imagination shared their experiences and their success seemed in part his own.

Clark stretched lazily and grinned at Lewis. "We sure do talk," he remarked. "Long as we live Captain Lewis and I will doubtless be a great trial to our friends. We'll wear 'em out telling 'em where we've been. Just for a change—what have you been up to, Matt?"

It suddenly occurred to Matt that he did have one item of news that might interest them and he gave a brief account of Malgares' descent upon the Pawnee town.

"I started out talking big," finished Matt, "but there wasn't much left to say when Malgares showed up with three hundred and fifty soldiers."

"Just the same you said it," said Lewis with a warmth of approval in his tone very pleasant to Matt.

The two captains wanted details. How many men had Malgares had? How many Regulars? Were his militia well



armed? What seemed to be his purpose? Was anything said about his orders? Both Lewis and Clark seemed to have gained during their long absence a strange perspective on the significance of continental affairs and by their journey a new comprehension of continental geography. Their interest centered on the official motive that had inspired the Spanish to make a move so unprecedented. For centuries it had been Spanish policy to regard the waste of plains and deserts providentially extending between their borders and those of other white settlements on the continent as a barrier men could not cross. Why now had they suddenly proved it readily crossed—by themselves sending a large expedition to the very fringe of the American frontier?

"The Spanish are always behindhand," suggested Lewis. "Maybe they planned to head us off. By the time they got word to Madrid and orders back to Mexico they were two and a half years late."

"They've never been so far behindhand when they're stirred up about something," objected Clark. "They always know what's going on up and down the Mississippi before we do."

"They did know about Pike planning to explore up the Arkansas," said Matt.

"They also knew how small his party was," said Clark. "They didn't need to send an army to pick him off."

Lewis rubbed his chin. "Malgares seemed to set a lot of store by impressing the Indians. An Indian war would be a nuisance on our Mississippi frontier." He shook his head. "But still that wouldn't be worth so much trouble by the Spaniards."

"The Spanish knew about Alta California for two hundred years without doing a thing about it," mused Clark. "But when they heard the Russians had a fur post on the Northwest coast they got busy and planted missions and army posts all the way up to San Francisco Bay."

"And they moved the same way into Texas when the French founded New Orleans," added Lewis.

"Now I think we're getting on the trail," said Clark. "They've got wind of some American move toward Mexico—or they think they have—and as usual are getting their licks in first." He shook his head. "How can we figure it out? We've been away so long we haven't the faintest idea what's been going on. Even Matt here has been cut off from things in the States for a year."

Lewis nodded. "At any event, it's important, and the sooner our government knows about it the better. We'll include it in our first report to the President when we get to St. Louis." He turned to Matt. "I think you better write the fullest personal account of the matter. We'll send that along with our report."

"That's too slow," Clark's tone had suddenly become decisive. "The Spaniards never waste effort. They know something." His hand closed on Matt's wrist. "You know your way overland from the Missouri to Clarksville. That's a faster route than by river." He turned to Lewis. "It will take days for us to get things straightened out after we get to St. Louis. And weeks for anything we write to get to Washington. But there's one man who'll know right away what this Malgares business means and who'll know what to do about it. That's my brother, the General."

Clark rose, drawing Matt up with him. "Your partner can take care of your furs, can't he? I'll give him a couple of men to help him with your canoe. Anyway that's private business and it can wait. I want you to take our story and your own straight to General Clark." Without waiting for Matt's acquiescence he raised his voice. "Sergeant Ordway, I'm taking Drouillard's canoe." He turned to Lewis again. "I want to give Matt a full report on our own results. My brother will need to know that in order to size up the Spanish business. So I'm going with Matt now to save time by talking to him on the way, I'll wait for you tomorrow on one of those islands this side of St. Charles."

Matt crouched in the bow of the canoe, his eyes fixed on the dark river ahead. The swift glide of the craft was made

to seem the swifter by the flowing shadows. Clark wielded the stern paddle. His voice came to Matt, low, steady, unhurried, filling the hours between midnight and dawn with a detailed account of the expedition's discoveries, which Matt was in turn to repeat to George Rogers Clark. The clear, exact voice went on and on, accounting for rivers, their width, depth, and length, the height of mountains, distances, rainfall, trees, game, soils, Indian nations, insects, shells, birds, temperatures, until those distant lands became so clear in Matt's imagination that it seemed as if he too had indeed made the journey.

The names struck him most of all, names that gave to rivers and mountains and lakes and valleys a reality the unnamed can never enjoy, names new to Matt listening to the sound of them for the first time there in the bow of the canoe on the dark river. Big Horn, Cowlitz, Yellowstone, Bitter Root, Cascade, Clackamas, Maria, John Day, Chop-punnish, Multnomah, Palouse, Salmon, Powder, Snake, Tongue, Wind River, Lemhi, Rosebud, Walla Walla. Names that beckoned.

Matt felt himself reinvigorated, his purpose as strong and pristine as on that first evening he had left the woodlot. One perception gleamed most brightly among a thousand glowing impressions. The two captains had traced the Missouri to its source and had reached the Western Ocean. Other men could but follow. The river was known and the way was known. But the mountains were not. Mountains were not to be known by a mere crossing. Their secrets were hidden in countless gorges, behind far peaks, among high meadows. It might take a man a lifetime to know the mountains. Out of the darkness before him rose again, bright, shimmering, crystal-clear, more attractive than ever before, the familiar image of the Shining Mountains.

After leaving Clark he paddled to the east bank of the Mississippi and set off through the forest. On that journey across the Illinois country his vitality seemed inexhaustible. Seldom did he pause to sleep more than an hour. He did not

hunt, begrudging the time it would take to build a cooking fire, but lived on berries and nuts, snatching them as he passed. He followed Indian trails when they chanced to lead his way but struck more often straight across-country, swimming rivers, wading marshes. He had no feeling that the time his mission was costing was at the expense of his personal purpose. It seemed to him, in fact, that he was more directly headed for the Shining Mountains than when first he had crossed this same country in the other direction.

He had two pieces of good luck. The fall rains held off, so that he was able to strike straight through swamps that would otherwise have been impassable. And at Vincennes he encountered a resident cousin of Bap's, known to him formerly at St. Charles, who loaned him a horse, there being now a passable track between Vincennes and Clarks-ville.

Matt arrived at the Clark cabin one midnight in an ice-cold rain. By the time Mose, the ancient black servant, had the door open, the old General, his nightshirt whipping about his legs, was halfway down the steep stairs.

"What's that you say? Billy's back, eh? Is that it?" He came forward, kicking his bare feet together to warm them against the cold floor, and peered at Matt in the light of Mose's upraised candle. "*Shut the door!*" he yelled at Mose. "This boy's had enough weather for one night." He looked at Matt again. "Not quite the boy you were the last time you were here, are you? Had an idea you'd fill out good. *Mose!*" He bellowed, though Mose was right at his elbow. "Build us a fire—a big one." He was still peering at Matt. "So Billy got to the Western Ocean?" As a matter of fact, Matt had so far only mentioned that he had news of the General's brother. "Get those wet clothes off. *Mose, fetch us a couple of blankets!* Got no time to dress now. Billy's found it a long way to the Western Ocean, eh?"

"They estimated they'd traveled by the way they took four thousand a hundred and forty-four miles when they sighted the ocean," said Matt.

The General nodded. "Knew it was a long way when Billy took so long getting back. Four thousand mile. That was a trip. Eight thousand there and back. And all through new country." He was lost in thought for a moment. "Wouldn't have minded being along on that one. *Mose, fetch us a bottle of that Monongahela!* Don't drink much myself now that I'm old and good for nothing, but, son, you need something to head off a chill. Might take one nip myself. Folks don't come back from the Western Ocean every day. Goddamit, why don't you tell me about it? What did you come here for in the middle of the night if it wasn't to tell me what happened? Just hit the high spots at first. Tomorrow when you've had some sleep we'll go into the little stuff. Then I want to hear it all."

Wrapped in blankets, warmed by the whisky and the roaring fire, Matt talked and the General listened. Matt remembered so well Clark's voice coming out of the darkness behind him that he was able to tell the same clear story in almost the same words. The General interrupted him only once.

"How's that? You wasn't along?"

Matt had so identified himself with the expedition that he had failed to make it clear that he was telling a second-hand story. He explained how he had been left behind.

"Too bad," said the General. "You missed something that happens only once."

Matt concluded with a description of the Malgares foray that had accounted for Clark's anxiety to get the entire budget of news to the General. The old man blinked at the fire for minutes, occasionally taking a careful sip of whisky from the bottle on the floor between them.

"Billy was right," he pronounced at length. "The Spaniards do know something. Like it's always been, they know it before most of us do. It's easy to figure what it is. It's Aaron Burr. He's got a scheme and he's got a good many backers. He wants to make a grab for Texas and maybe northern Mexico. That's a rich country he thinks it would

be nice for us to have—together with a slather of new room for him to throw his weight around in. Wilkinson will help him if the scheme goes good and turn against him if it starts to go sour. Good many other big people feel the same way. There's something for the Spaniards to worry about all right. It's not a bad scheme, either. We'll have to have that Texas country sooner or later. But it's the same business as when I wanted to make a reach for New Orleans. All a question of time. I thought I was right—and still do. Probably Burr feels the same way now.

"But now we come to what Billy's got in his craw. He's really right this time. What Billy and young Lewis found out blazes the other side of the tree." He paused for another thoughtful sip of whisky. "That's quite a country they found. If the soil up the Missouri can support all those buffalo and antelope and elk it can support three times that many cattle and make homes for a good many of our people who'll be ready to move in on it before you're as old as I am. And that country beyond the mountains sounds just as well watered as Ireland and England. Our kind of people can get along there fine. That's a country we should have. Now let's see where Burr comes in. He'll get us into a Spanish war. We'll win in time, but it might keep us busy for a few years. While that goes on the English workin' out from Hudson's Bay will get that good Oregon country first and get all the Indians set against us like they did on the Ohio thirty years ago. With distances what they are out there it'll be a worse touch-and-go than the Ohio business, which was too close for comfort, and we might never get in at all. On the other hand, this Texas country is like a ripe apple. Just like New Orleans it'll fall into our laps in good time. So we better spend our heavy worrying up the Missouri. Looks to me, son, like we better see what we can do to head Burr off. *Mose, fetch me pen and paper!*"

Matt wrote while the General dictated letters to the President, to the governors of Kentucky and Ohio, and to trusted friends in the army.

"For thirty years I've been writing letters without getting anybody to pay much attention," said the General, signing the letters, "but maybe this will be different."

When a short time later Matt heard the news that fourteen boatloads of Burr's military stores had been seized on the Ohio, he realized that he had had a part in one of those moments which become history.

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE cold rain began turning to sleet as Matt climbed the rocky way that led from the riverbank to St. Louis on its limestone bluff above. At this late hour the narrow streets were deserted and dark. Matt had no idea where Lewis and Clark might be staying, at what inn or in whose home. But he knew with what anxiety they were awaiting word of his mission and he set about making determined inquiries. It was not a difficult search. At the first inn door he beat upon, a stableboy who had been asleep in a blanket just over the threshold announced that both captains were attending a ball at the Chouteau house.

St. Louis society had responded with an overflowing enthusiasm to the return of the young heroes from the Western Ocean, which had sadly delayed the resumption of their journey eastward, the preparation of their final reports, the payment and discharge of their men, and the settlement of the expedition's accounts. Tonight's was the climactic farewell ball before the explorers left for Kentucky and Virginia and the nation's capital to report to the President.

The great square house loomed with pale brilliance behind its loopholed stone wall, its gleaming shuttered windows, seen through the slanting rain, seeming to shimmer with the beat of the music pulsing within. Before the gate nine carriages waited, evidence of the new urban manners the old town was eagerly embracing. Matt mounted the steep front steps leading up from the gate, strode past the

startled Negro doorman, and paused, dripping, in the ball-room doorway.

The light of a hundred candles was dazzling after the darkness behind him. A wave of warm perfumed air replaced the cold and wet he had just left. He was reminded of the sweet-grass-scented warmth of the Cedar Island cabin and its contrast to the storm beyond the elkskin at his back. He had discovered then how short the step is between a man's work and a man's pleasure. Here, too, it was but a step from the solitude of storm and darkness to the presence of women in a warm lighted room.

Before when he had watched people dance, at St. Charles and at the Pawnee town, the performance had stirred him to no more than an amused, rather superior interest, far short of the strange excitement with which he was now suddenly seized. At St. Charles the dance had seemed no more than a kind of community gambol in which young and old, men, women, and children, joined in a spirit of innocence and simplicity to give vent to their instinct to play. Among the Pawnee the dance had had a complex tribal and religious pattern by which the devotees expressed deep-seated emotions and ideas and impulses that their primitive art and language had no means to express otherwise and invariably towards the end their dancing became an open display of sexual gestures, postures, and acts. Perhaps this was the key to his excitement. In the Omaha language there was one and the same word for the two actions—dancing and fornicating.

This quadrille he was watching was, for all its outward decorum, no more than a conventionalized form of courtship, every phase of which flaunted and dramatized the claims of sex. Men and women were advancing toward and retreating from one another, bowing and smiling, repulsing and inviting, refusing and promising, proclaiming by every look and gesture the irresistible appeal each possessed for the other. Among the Pawnee comparable gestures and postures had seemed altogether detached from any emotions he himself might acknowledge, and therefore slightly ludicrous, like



the amorous antics of animals. But these were people of his own race and kind, with impulses to be recognized as no different from his own.

He found himself particularly watching the women. In this light, their spirits exhilarated by music and movement, all had the semblance of beauty. His gaze sought out the amazingly white face of this one, the trim ankles beneath the swishing skirt of the next, the bare shoulders and bosom of the third. His Cedar Island wintering had taught him more than savage dialects. It had taught him to surmise, appreciatively, the pleasure a woman was equipped to yield were she so inclined. With his first glance he noted a dozen women here whom his winter-educated judgment deemed clearly superior in this respect to Mountain Cherry.

Nora, turning in the course of the dance in a far corner of the room, suddenly caught sight of him in the doorway. Lydia had said he would be back. Now he was here. Nora found herself both fearful and glad, fearful lest the long schooling she had given herself to keep him out of her mind should prove to have gone for naught, nevertheless glad that he was near again if only for a moment. She saw how his long tawny hair, tied at the back of his neck with a rawhide thong, gleamed with moisture, how the raindrops glittered on his angular cheeks and wrists, how the wet buckskin clung to his body like the skin of an animal. He seemed to have brought with him into this stuffy, crowded room a gust of wind and rain from forest and river and from far fresh distances.

She saw his regard rest speculatively on various women as they danced past him. Then he saw her across the room and seemed strangely startled, more astonished by something about her, it seemed, than could have been accounted for by mere surprise. He was making a move as if to push his way among the dancers toward her when both Captain Clark and Captain Lewis left the floor to rush to greet him.

Nora continued to respond to the music and to her companions in the dance, her smile bright and mechanical,

but her entire attention remained on the figure in the doorway. The two captains were listening to Matt's message with the greatest interest and satisfaction. She had known they had intercepted Matt somewhere on the river and dispatched him on some secret mission that it was expected would bring him back presently to report to them in St. Louis. This had accounted for her willingness to accompany Lydia and Austin when they came to the house in town to attend the last week of the community's festivities in honor of the explorers.

No matter how engrossed with his official conference, Matt kept glancing from it out across the dance floor. No longer did his glance wander speculatively from woman to woman; invariably it sought and followed only Nora. When her occasional glance in his direction chanced to meet his he did not look away, but smiled instead, his insistent, eager regard not admitting but proclaiming the singleness of his interest. Nora was breathless. Whatever had happened to him during the intervening months, this was a different man from the one who when last she saw him was fading from her sight into the forest without a backward glance.

The music stopped. The chattering commotion incident to the return of the ladies to their duennas, and their escorts' ensuing scramble to claim their partners for the next dance, began to dwindle. She saw Matt start toward her and Captain Lewis lay a detaining hand on his arm. In the comparative silence Lewis raised his voice to make an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I present my own and Captain Clark's very good friend—Matthew Morgan. He did not accompany us across the continent, but his service to us was such that we feel about him as if he had. Mr. Morgan has just now arrived after an arduous journey of the most extraordinary value to our country's future."

Nora listened with pride to the applause. But even this public tribute failed to distract him from his former inten-

tion. He made his excuses to the two captains, both of whom laughed sympathetically and bowed to her across the room, and again started toward her.

Unhappily the music resumed at the same moment and Major Gray, to whom she had granted the dance earlier in the evening, appeared at her side. Matt, however, moved in with assurance.

"This is my dance, I believe," he remarked, offering his arm.

The Major flushed, bowed stiffly, and stood his ground. In past days the soldier had had his fill of leather-clad young men who turned out to be heroes. His glance ran coldly over Matt's weather-stained buckskins. "I can only assume, sir, you are making a mistake."

Nora made haste to present them to each other. "Major Gray—Mr. Morgan. I'm afraid there has been a mistake, Major. And the fault is all mine." She smiled ingratiatingly at the officer but laid the tips of her fingers on Matt's arm.

The Major bowed stiffly again.

"You would forgive me, Major Gray," said Matt, "if you knew how far I'd come to claim this dance." He drew Nora's hand through his arm and turned her from the dance floor toward the chairs ranged along the wall. "I'm a dog in the manger," he murmured, "for I can't dance. But I have come a long way to talk to you." When they sat down he turned sideways in his chair to face her. "And to look at you," he added.

He then looked at her, indeed, with a regard that traveled with deliberate approval over her arms, her bare shoulders, her face and hair. She had long been accustomed to such glances of male estimation cast in the direction of Lydia's charms, and in the past year to such glances toward her own. But she sensed that from Matt such attention had a more important significance. Lydia to the contrary, his ways were not predictable merely because he was a man. In her own experience with him when once his mind was turned to reach for something his grasp closed hard upon it.

He was a man of the wilds, one who followed his fortune into that region where only the roughest and the hardest ventured, a semibarbarian in whose nature there must be something savage to account for this strange bent. Such thoughts were racing across the surface of Nora's mind. Deep within her her one emotion was a most unmaidenly welcome of his attention.

"I'd quite forgotten how you looked," said Matt.

"It's not very flattering for you to admit it openly."

"You likely hear enough flattery." He had settled something in his mind and was eager to examine his discovery. It was a subject of sufficient interest to her, as well. "I remember when first I left you in the Shawnee camp I couldn't recall how you looked at all. Then after a while I began to see some things about you very clearly. For example, the expression on your face when you were looking at the birds."

"Why, you had eyes for nothing but the deer," protested Nora.

"It was before I saw the deer," said Matt. "Other things I have been able to remember, too. Your hair—and the color of your eyes—and the way the wind blew your dress on the cliff top. But it was all like little separate pieces of a picture, not like actually seeing you. I never could remember how you really looked. Not, at any rate, the way you look now. I'm sounding all mixed-up, like the explanation of your family."

Lydia chose this most unsuitable of all moments to leave the dance and swoop upon them like some gay, delicate, golden plumaged but single-purposed bird of prey.

"Why, Matthew Morgan!" she exclaimed. "I *am* glad to see you. What a surprise! Though I suppose we should never be surprised. It seems to be your way. Just like the last time we saw you—and again you come late and again immediately become the center of attention. Though I do hope this time your stay will not be so brief." She patted his arm and withdrew her hand from his damp sleeve with a

little cry of alarm. "And as I live and breathe, again you come *wet*. Now don't interrupt me, Nora. We see him so seldom that we must take better care of him when we do. The man will catch his death. I have it. I specially told Neb to keep a good fire going to keep the chill off our house, because I realize we'd be coming in late. You must take him there, Nora, and see that he gets warm and dry again."

"An excellent idea," said Matt promptly, glancing out over the crowded and noisy ballroom and back again to Nora's face.

"Of course it is," continued Lydia. "Just stroll out by the punch bowl and slip out the back door and no one will notice." She gave them an urgent little push and under cover of kissing Nora's cheek whispered in her ear, "and don't forget to be grateful for your poor old mother's bright ideas."

The outer darkness was frigid in contrast to the atmosphere of the overheated house they had left. Placing her hand on Matt's arm, Nora was astounded by the chill of the wet leather. Her cry of alarm, unlike Lydia's, was unplanned and genuine.

"But your clothes are like ice! You must be freezing."

Matt laughed. "I'm used to it. If you knew how many days and nights I've gone without ever once getting warm or dry, and never the worse for it."

"I know this is one night you'll not go without getting warm and dry," ruled Nora firmly.

When they reached home she took command with the calm decision of one accustomed to child care who knows best what is good for one in her charge. She lighted a candle at the hearth, threw more wood on the fire, sent Neb to bed, and brought a blanket to Matt.

"Take your things off and spread them out to dry," she directed. "And wrap up well in this blanket."

While she was in the kitchen Matt obeyed. When she returned presently with a cold roast chicken and a mug of

hot buttered rum he was squatted in a corner of the wide fireplace, swathed in his blanket like a trading-post Indian.

She gave him the chicken and the rum and sat down on a stool to watch, very contented by the interest with which he eyed the food and drink she had placed before him. But it was now his turn to issue directions.

"No, not there," he commanded. "Over there where I can see you." She moved to sit in the corner of the fireplace opposite him. "Now turn a little more into the firelight. There—that's better."

Satisfied that she was now where he could see her well, he tasted the rum, smacked his lips, and began tearing hungrily at the chicken, his teeth glistening white in the glow of the flames. He ate swiftly and methodically with the intent dispatch of an animal. From his drying buckskins spread out on the bricks between them rose a faint smell of pine and rain and fur and wood smoke, a smell at once earthy and wild. Again she realized how much he yet seemed to her a stranger, perhaps even a savage. The impression excited more than it disturbed her.

He finished the chicken, took another swallow of rum, and with an oddly civilized gesture wiped his mouth on the napkin. Then he was looking at her again, with the same steady, searching scrutiny as in the ballroom, as if the sight of her person was a wonder to him of which he could never see enough. The strange, intent perceptiveness in his regard reminded her, irrelevantly it seemed to her, of the way Bap had looked at her that day in St. Charles when he had run down the hill to the boat landing and had come to a sudden speechless halt beside the bateau, staring down at her in puzzling astonishment, his eyes bright, his swarthy face paling. She had been annoyed then, but she was pleasantly confused now and in her confusion she hastily inquired about Bap.

"He's gone back to the Pawnee," said Matt. "I only learned that myself an hour ago from Captain Clark. You see, when the captains met us on the river they sent

me with a message to Louisville. Bap came on with the beaver we trapped last winter. But when he tried to sell them here in St. Louis they were seized to satisfy a debt owed Manuel Lisa by Joe Thorn. Joe is a partner we took in while we were having trouble with the Pawnee. Bap was naturally exercised, and instead of waiting for me he decided to save time by going straight back to the Pawnee to find out from Joe if he really owed the money. It was for trade goods Lisa claimed he had advanced Joe two years ago."

"But they were your furs," protested Nora with indignation. "You'd worked all winter gathering them."

"We also took Joe Thorn as a partner," said Matt. "If he does owe Manuel Lisa for trade goods, then we're equally responsible for the debt."

Nora's practical instincts were offended. She suspected advantage was being taken of Matt. "Why did you need another partner? I should have thought Bap was enough."

"Enough of a liability, you mean? Bap is a good partner. I need him. And I need Joe Thorn, too. On account of the trouble with the Pawnee."

"Captain Lewis said you had been captured by the Spanish expedition," said Nora, encouraging him to go on. She felt a sudden anxious need to know more about his life in those endless periods during which he had not only disappeared from her sight but escaped from every faintest contact with the world she knew.

But to tell the story, however, briefly, it became necessary for Matt to explain Malgares and the Pawnee council meeting and this in turn led of necessity to mentioning Little Owl and the occasion for their coming to the Grand Pawnee town in the first place. Having become involved in his backward-treading narrative, he continued with it, pausing from time to time to sip his drink, each moment talking more freely, finding an unexpected satisfaction in telling her about himself. It came to her less as a story than a series of scenes. She caught vivid glimpses of the faces

around the council fire, of Malgares' cavalcade descending from the hills, of the Sioux warriors cascading down the bluff, of the desolate Omaha shrine, of the tremendous swirl of ascending pelicans. The sequence of events and much of the detail remained unclear to her, as for example, the precise circumstances under which the two Indian women cooked for them at their winter camp, but she was afraid to stop him with questions lest her curiosity dry up the springs of his self-revelation.

She listened, terrified by the recital of the risks to which he had been subjected, yet continuously eager to peer deeper into this strange world in which he moved when away from her, as a young mother listens, half fascinated, half revolted, to the tales brought back to the safety of his home by her eight-year-old son as he boasts with revealing innocence of fisticuffs, dog fights, stone-throwings, and other unmoral activities in which he has participated with his barbarous little equals.

His story, moving faster now, retracing his progress, touched upon the wolf pack, the buffalo calf, the first buffalo, and suddenly returned to the beginning, the game of billiards.

"You must have thought it queer," he said, "my rushing off like that."

"I learned all about it the next day." She could afford to be generous now. "St. Charles talked about little else for months."

"I seem to have been doing some talking myself," he said.

"I've enjoyed every word of it. And I can begin to understand what a terribly interesting life it must be for a man." She was irritated by the insincerity of her words as she uttered them. It was easy enough to imagine a man finding his way of life interesting. Probably it possessed the fascination of the hunt, multiplied many times. But it did not interest her. It seemed to her an entire waste of time for a man of his force and talent. Suddenly she blurted



out the question she could no longer resist putting to him. "Do you plan always to be a trader among the Indians?"

She could see how instantly he was on guard, how immediately aware he was of the import of her reckless question. Where before everything had been pleasant and easy between them now there was tension. His answer was measured and careful. "I've never really stopped to think that far ahead. It's the kind of business where it's hard to look beyond the next season." A faint note of what seemed like defiance crept into his tone. "At any rate, I have no other plan now."

She could have had no reason to expect a different answer, no excuse, to be fair, to put the miserable question at all. Yet his answer was like a slap in the face. "For your whole life?"

"If it takes so long to get what I'm after."

Nora flamed with a resentment that burned the more fiercely because she must take such care to conceal it. He would not give an inch. He could have lied a little. There was no need for him to be so aggressively unbending. This was different from the Shawnee cabin or the housewarming. Then he had been like a passing stranger legitimately intent upon his own designs. But he had been no stranger since he had walked into the ballroom. She had been made to feel that he wanted her the way a man is supposed to want a woman. Now he was making her know that he wanted her only on certain terms. He wanted to take only so much and to give nothing.

"I can see you don't approve." He seemed genuinely troubled, yet the statement came to her like a taunt.

"It does seem such a waste," she admitted. "Like a boy perpetually running away."

She was attacking something he felt compelled to defend. "If you think it's a waste of time because it's not a business, then you're wrong. Every one of the leading men in St. Louis is interested, one way or another, in the fur trade.

It's the main business of the territory. It is a risky one—that's true enough—but because of that there's a big profit in it, too. If you think it's a waste of time because so much about it is crazy and wild and with so little direct purpose, you're only half right even there. No white man except the trader has any reason to go out into the Indian country. It'll be maybe a hundred years before farms and towns spread out there. So for the time being it's the traders who fill the place of the early settlers—the kind that won Kentucky and Tennessee for us. The traders are the Daniel Boones of this new West."

His defense was vigorous but unconvincing. What he was really defending was something else, some hidden spring in his nature he could not or would not account for in so many words.

"Which of these two virtues attracts you—making money or being a pioneer?" she asked. The effort to remain composed lent to her tone the tolerant insistence of a school-teacher extracting an unequivocal answer from an uncertain pupil.

He flushed angrily. "First let me ask you a question. You seem to have thought out your opinions. What would you have a man do?"

"Whatever he most wanted to do, of course. So long as it was something honest and useful—and—and—responsible."

"You mean—so long as he stayed home and raised a family."

"And what's wrong with that? What other way can a man be any good, except to himself?"

For a moment their glances crossed and held. In that moment they were enemies, stubborn, resentful. Then, ashamed, both looked quickly away into the fire. Nora was in despair. It had been quite unnecessary to provoke this dispute in terms so theoretical and impersonal that any man was bound to resist. How differently Lydia would have handled the matter! She would never have per-

mitted a principle so important to come to an issue until the man's arms were around her and the debate could be carried on in whispers against his ear. Nora herself, with no more feminine craft than the patience to wait a little longer, could have been in this man's arms now. It was the one place in the world she wanted most to be. Yet she could not now even bring herself to look toward him.

The silence continuing, became each moment more portentous, more final. She must do something to break the spell. Her lips formed words—"Well, Matt, a penny for your thoughts." Or "Matt, wouldn't you like another mug of rum?" But no sound came forth. After all, he was the man. He could afford to make the first innocent overture. Suppose he said no more than "Don't you want me to put more wood on the fire?" or "Sounds like it's stopped raining." But he remained silent. Each moment the tension became more implacable. It was as if their heedless dispute were a genie that between them they had inadvertently released from the bottle and which now, between them, they could not drive back into its prison. There was but one simple incantation that could save them. Either might say, "I love you." Neither did.

There came a step at the door and a fumbling with the lock. Lydia and Austin came in, Lydia clucking in scornful dismay and Austin, a little drunk, laughing noisily. Matt and Nora started up as guiltily as if they had been surprised in an indiscretion.

"I do declare," mocked Lydia, "from the glimpse I got through the window you two do violate all the conventions. Not content with spending the night under the same roof, you must fall asleep together."

"You don't know the half of it," said Matt. "She also plied me with rum."

"And with a whole roast chicken, too," said Nora. "But there was no keeping him from nodding."

Lydia's first quick glance was enough to tell her the night had been no romantic triumph and she was too tired to

conceal her irritation at her daughter's ineptitude. "You might at least have given him a bed. Can't you see the poor man's worn-out? It's not too late to do it now."

"Not only not too late, but high time," put in Austin, pointing unsteadily at the window through which the first gray light was breaking.

"I've already asked him," said Nora. "But he's got some sort of an early breakfast engagement with Captain Lewis and Captain Clark."

Matt nodded. He could hardly blame her for wanting to get rid of him. He wanted to get away himself.

Lydia saw that they were merely making excuses and her irritation increased. "Well, he can't very well dress with us standing here." She handed Nora a fresh candle from the mantel.

Nora bent to light it at the coals and, rising, contrived a calm smile at Matt.

"Good night, Matt."

"Good night, Nora."

Lydia overtook Nora in the passageway. "You do make the least of your opportunities. What did you quarrel about?"

"We didn't quarrel."

"No? You looked to me like you'd been beating each other."

"We did have a difference of opinion."

"So you spend a long cozy evening with your hero having differences of opinions. Fine thing."

"He's not my hero. He's the most self-centered man I've ever known."

"Hate him?"

"Lydia—I do believe I do."

"How did he seem to feel about you?"

"He was furious at me."

Lydia relaxed. "A good fight's never too bad a sign. A man always runs away without fighting unless he wants you enough to want to make you over."

Once the ladies had withdrawn Austin forgot his former impatience to retire. He fumbled until he found a cigar, knelt with only slight difficulty to light it at the fire, rose successfully to his feet, puffed luxuriously, and peered through the smoke with a pleased expression at Matt tying his leggings. He seemed more amiable even than his usually amiable self. Also there was something on his mind.

"Fine girl, Nora," he observed. "Maybe the finest. After her mother, that is, of course."

"Yes," agreed Matt.

Austin clasped his hand beneath his coattails, teetered urbanely back and forth, and regarded Matt indulgently and reflectively. "What do you plan on doing this winter, Matt? I mean before you set off for the wilds again."

"Make some money," said Matt. "I'll need it—after getting my whole winter's hunt attached."

"Got any special plans?" persisted Austin.

"I thought maybe I'd go down to the mines. I hear there's lots of new activity down there the last couple of years."

"Think it over first," advised Austin. "I know hundreds of Americans from all up and down the Ohio are rushing in. They're digging up that whole country of Ste. Geneviève. They think they're going to find silver. They act like those mines had just been discovered. As a matter of fact, the Spanish have worked them for the last fifty years. And the French for a hundred years before that. There's nothing down there but lead and no matter how much they dig that's all they'll find."

"With so much going on a man can likely find a job working for wages," said Matt, putting on his cap.

"Well, good night, my boy," Austin said, ushering Matt to the door. "But before you decide anything be sure to talk to me. I tell you what. Come to the store around noon today. I've some information that may interest you."

Matt left the house hastily, glad to escape Austin and

his friendly interest in his affairs. It was not only Austin. He wanted to be away from people. He had to be alone so that he could think, if he could bring himself to think.

Full daylight had come but with little relief from the chill and darkness of the night. Low gray clouds driven before a violent wind were scudding past seemingly at the very rooftops. With the wind came a thin biting rain that soon had wetted Matt as thoroughly as before. He walked out of town and along the cliffs above the Mississippi, facing the strongest blasts of the wind, welcoming the cold and rain as if he expected the sweep of the elements to sweep the confusion from his mind.

But the cold and the rain left him untouched. The gale ruffled no more than the fringe of his hunting shirt. He saw not the racing clouds, the bent trees, the tossing river, but only the play of light and shadow from the fire passing caressingly over Nora's hair and cheek and shoulder. The storm had no power to drive from his sight the vision of Nora across from him in the warmth and glow of the fireplace, her face bright and intent as she listened, her expression accepting and welcoming his presence. That initial moment of startled perception when first he had glimpsed her at the dance had not been an illusion. She was more beautiful than other women. And it was a different beauty, for it had a special and personal meaning for him, setting her apart from all others.

He began to wonder, warily at first, if the way he was feeling about her amounted to what was commonly considered falling in love. Nothing in his former experience helped him to judge. Nothing that he had observed in Bap's preoccupation with women, for example, nothing he himself had felt standing in the doorway of the Chouteau ballroom, watching the Pawnee corn festival, cavorting with Mountain Cherry in the Cedar Island cabin, cast any light whatever on the subject. He was in another world now and what he felt had no more connection with any-

thing that had happened to him before than if he were no longer himself but the most utter stranger.

There seemed little actual substance to what he felt. He yearned to be with this woman, to be able to look at her, to be near her, to hear her voice and her laugh, to know the blessing of her mere presence in the same room, but his imagination recoiled from the admission of any physical desire to possess her. Yet the possibility that he might never possess her was something he could not contemplate. What he did feel within himself at the moment as he endeavored to examine his feelings was a confusion that was hollow and nervous and breathless and so strangely excited that it was almost like being ill.

It must be so, he confessed suddenly with mingled alarm and delight. It must be he was in love with Nora Eliot.

But the delight swiftly faded while the alarm became a danger against which he could summon no defense. He could not contemplate giving up Nora. Still less could he give up the whole way of life upon which he was embarked. There was a choice to be made that he could not make and yet he must force himself to make. He could not tell her, vaguely, to wait for him to come back, to wait until he had had his fill of travel. He had no way now of knowing when he would come back.

The sun broke through the clouds but he was unaware of the brighter light. He turned and strode away again along the cliffs. Austin, puffing, was forced to overtake him. Matt was almost glad to see him, for the necessity of listening saved him, for the moment, from thinking.

"Saw you from the street down there and thought we might as well talk here." Austin, ordinarily so amiably discursive, was one capable of coming swiftly to the point when, as was so often the case, he sought some service or accommodation from another. "Captain Lewis tells me you know the Illinois country between here and Louisville—that you know it like most people know their own back yard."

"I've crossed it a couple of times," admitted Matt.

"So. What do you think of the chance of getting a dozen yoke of oxen, a few cows, and some thirty brood mares, together with several colts and a couple of stallions—of getting a bunch of stock of that size overland through that country between now and spring?"

"I think there'd be no sense trying it. I'd wait until spring."

"You can't bring them across in the spring. All that country's flooded then. I know that myself."

"Then I'd put them on barges and bring them round by river."

"There's often ice in the river until the end of March and this stock has to be out of Kentucky by the first of March."

Matt studied Austin's eager flushed face. He knew Austin was, to say the best for him, an exceedingly impractical businessman who had already wasted most of a once considerable patrimony. He suspected something peculiar in this scheme beyond the limits of mere bad judgment. Yet there could be no harm in giving his opinion.

"It would depend on the river, of course. If the snow didn't get too deep, there were no bad blizzards, and no quick thaws, you might bring them through. There's some of that swamp country you can only get across, as a matter of fact, when it's frozen solid. Cattle will browse on most anything when they get hungry enough. And horses will winter fairly well on cottonwood bark. Be sure you take enough salt. Eating frozen rushes and frozen bark will kill animals sometimes if they don't get plenty of salt."

"There'll be plenty of salt. And help, too. There'll be three niggers to help drive and Henry Sims, the overseer of my place down there, to keep them in line. You'll have everything you need."

"I'll need? I wouldn't think of it. It's too big a risk. It's a crazy scheme. As your friend I'll have nothing to do with it."



Austin put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "It's just because you are my friend that I have the courage to talk to you. I have no secrets to keep from you. I have not told Lydia or Nora because I do not wish to worry them. But I am selling my half-interest in this store. It was necessary to meet notes falling due in Kentucky this winter. If I could get this stock moved to my place in Riverhill, where as you know it would be worth more on account of the higher prices in that territory, I might hope to get on my feet again. But I have other obligations coming due the first of March. My creditors won't be put off any longer. They'll attach this Kentucky stock instead of my land down there, because the stock's easier to sell. I can't move the land but I can the stock, and I can use it here to the advantage, eventually, even of my creditors. That's why I have to get it out of Kentucky this winter. And don't get the idea, my boy, I'm appealing only to your friendship. This is a business proposition. I'll give you a quarter-interest in the stock you're able to get through with."

Matt hardly heard the last. He had already made up his mind. Once more he was offered the opportunity to free himself by serving Nora. He would build more defenses around the house he had built for her. He would rid her of this new threat to her peace and security. Then he could go.

"I'll do it," he said.

His sudden acceptance astonished Austin, who had been prepared for more argument. "You will?" He persisted eagerly. "When can you start for Kentucky?"

"Right now—today."

Austin cleared his throat. "When you say good-by to Nora and Lydia, I hope you'll say nothing about your errand. It would only cause them unnecessary anxiety. And Nora would give me hell. She'd assume I was taking advantage of you—which of course I am."

Matt looked toward the town. "They're probably still

asleep. And the sooner I get started the better. Please make my apologies to them."

The same hour he bought a canoe and set out for Kentucky.

## CHAPTER XXIV

THE Illinois winter was marked by the weather Matt had feared most. The snow was deep. There was more than one bad blizzard. There were quick thaws. Drifts covered the best forage. Bottoms were flooded or frozen. The hills were wind-swept. The cold at times became so intense as to threaten to freeze the whole herd in a night.

Matt set himself against the elements with tireless energy. He drove his helpers from their blankets to keep the stock in motion, forcing the animals with clubs and pointed sticks to circle and mill about lest they lie down to die. Sometimes great fires were built around which the cattle and horses soon learned to huddle gratefully. When the snow covered most forage, cottonwood trees were felled and the bark stripped to feed the stock—by hand in case of the lower-spirited cattle, who often preferred going hungry to make the effort to eat bark. For weeks at a time there was rest and comfort for neither man nor beast.

The white overseer proved unready to stand the strain and fled back to Kentucky under cover of the first blizzard. The Negroes, though they suffered excruciatingly from the cold, remained more faithful, because of their terrible fear of Matt. They feared his energy, his temper, his strength, and his knowledge of woodcraft, which in their eyes amounted to magic. They had observed how closely he forecast the weather, how many things he saw without seeming to look at them, how well he knew the mysterious ways of wild animals, how he could strike fire from his flint and steel in the fiercest gale, how certainly he could track and recapture strayed stock. No one of them had the

slightest doubt that were he to take flight, he would be surely overtaken before he had traveled a mile.

Spring came with a sudden general thaw that turned all southern Illinois into a treetop-dotted pond. There was no way to drive the animals on toward the Mississippi even had their half-starved condition permitted it. Matt edged the herd northward, keeping to the low ridges between the swollen creeks, giving ample time for browsing on the new buds, until he had gained the higher prairies on the low rise of land between the Kaskaskia and the eastern tributaries of the Illinois. Here he let the animals rest, and gather strength from the sprouting grass and leaves.

It was mid-April before Matt decided the animals were strong enough for the drive to the Mississippi. Even then he was denied the satisfaction of delivering his prize unaided, just as he had been denied when he had started out with the venison for the Lewis and Clark winter camp. Again it was Drouillard who came to meet him. Drouillard was guiding Daniel Austin. The veteran woodsman had no difficulty finding Matt, for he had decided that if Matt and the stock were still alive they could only have followed the course Matt actually had followed.

When Austin saw the column of horses and cattle winding through the woods his mouth fell open.

"I'd have counted myself lucky to have you come through with half of them," he exulted incredulously. "Didn't you lose any?"

"Ten," said Matt. "One cow mired, one ox and two colts froze to death, one ox just laid down and died, one horse fell down a bank and broke his neck, one bull was killed by a falling tree, that gray stallion fell in a fire and had to be shot, one mare was run off by the Kickapoo, and that good-for-nothing straw boss of yours rode back on another. We started with fifty-six head. Three calves and five foals that lived brought it back up to fifty-four."

"I'd never have believed it possible. Not after the kind of winter this one was. Of course Nora was sure you'd bring

them through. She was just as mad at me as I thought she'd be when I finally told her what you were doing. But she didn't have the least doubt you'd be able to do it. She said that only made it worse—turning to you again after all you'd done."

Drouillard glanced at the sinking sun and twitched Matt's sleeve. "Captain Clark, he wants to see you right now," he said.

Austin beamed apologetically. "That's right. Seeing all this stock alive and kicking gave me such a turn I was quite forgetting. That's why Drouillard came along with me—to make sure of finding you quicker. I can take over from here on. They want you in St. Louis to go somewhere. If I was going anywhere I'd want you along, too."

Drouillard pulled at Matt's sleeve again. Matt picked up his rifle.

"Now about your quarter of the stock," said Austin, hanging to Matt's other arm. "You remember that was our deal. Nora said to tell you that if you didn't want to sell them right away she'd take care of them for you. We've got lots of pasture."

"I do want her to hold them for me," said Matt. "And let her pick out the ones to make up my share."

Austin groaned. "Oh, oh! You've never driven a sharper bargain. She'll have the shirt off my back."

Trotting through the night at Drouillard's heels, Matt dwelt pleasantly on his new conjunction of his fortune with those of Nora. It seemed to him fitting that she should not only be living in the house he had built for her but also caring for his stock. As a matter of fact, the stock was as much hers as his own, as would be whatever proceeds he gained from his trading expedition. In his mind she was already in possession of a full interest in anything he would ever be able to accumulate. He could journey untroubled to the farthest mountains, his purpose supported by the knowledge that he was working for their common

purpose. He was giving so much to this common purpose that there seemed less need prematurely to give himself.

Drouillard circled through the fields around the frontier hamlets of Edwardsville, Goshen, and Judy, lest in passing through the sleeping settlements the dogs' barking delay them by making them pause to account for themselves. They reached Piggott's Ferry on the Mississippi at dawn. Without waiting for the cumbersome ferry, Drouillard engaged a canoe of a Shawnee duck-hunter. The early sun was bright on the cliffs of St. Louis above them before Matt remembered he had yet to find out why Captain Clark has sent Drouillard to hasten his return.

The explanation was exciting and required many more words than Drouillard was accustomed to use. Manuel Lisa, stirred by the Lewis and Clark report of rich beaver country and strange tribes unacquainted with traders on the upper reaches of the Mississippi, had organized the largest trading expedition yet to ascend the river and it was his intention to proceed as far as the fabulous Yellowstone or even to the foot of the great mountains. Drouillard, familiar with the country because he had accompanied Lewis and Clark, was going with Lisa as his right-hand man. The two captains, just returned from Washington to become respectively Governor of Missouri Territory and Brigadier General of Militia with special responsibility for Indian affairs, remembering Matt's ambition to go so far, had in his name engaged cargo space for his trade goods in one of Lisa's keelboats. When his return from the Illinois country had been delayed, they had even taken the pains to assemble his outfit, withdrawing the Adam trading goods stored with Pierre Chouteau. When his return was still further delayed, they had prevailed on Drouillard, to Lisa's loud dissatisfaction, to go with Austin to look for Matt. Manuel Lisa was already at St. Charles, waiting impatiently to start.

Matt felt a surge of jealous dissatisfaction to learn of

other men as eager as he to make that distant journey. But if a strongly armed party were going so far he would be a fool not to accompany it. And he could take pride in the readiness of his two friends, with so many greater concerns on their minds, to do so much on his behalf.

At Government House Matt was welcomed by Sergeant Pryor, who ran excitedly up the stairs to announce him, his manner giving pleasing evidence of the esteem in which Matt was held by the new authorities governing the territory. A middle-aged Indian, pale, portly, dignified, dressed in green-silk knee-breeches, a gilt-embroidered waistcoat, a much beruffled and begrimed white shirt, a long bright-yellow tailed coat, and a high-crowned black beaver hat, sat on a bench at the foot of the stairs, engrossed in a newspaper. He lowered the paper and glanced over it at Matt, recognizing him at once with the amazing Indian ability to remember faces.

"Ha—the young man with the many goose," he said, beaming, eager to show off his English. "How do you do."

This must be Shehaka, whom Matt had barely noticed in the darkness the night the returning expedition had been feasted on Bap's wild geese. He was already famed the country over as the Mandan chief brought back by Lewis and Clark to be presented to the President and to be feted and lionized in every city of the East.

"How do you do, Shehaka. You are well, I trust?"

"I am well," said Shehaka enthusiastically.

He raised his newspaper and resumed his studied pretense of reading it, his eyes traveling in close attention across the page, though he was holding the journal upside down. When a clerk in a corner, reading another paper, turned a page, Shehaka turned his.

"Matt—what's the matter with you?" came a cheerful yell from the top of the stairs. "What are you doing hiding down there?"

Matt found them at breakfast in the Governor's office.

"Sit down and eat," commanded Lewis. "Probably the

first time you've sat down to eat all winter and it's certain to be the last chair you'll see for another year."

"Pryor says you brought fifty-four head through the winter," said Clark.

York, Clark's body servant, noted as the first and as yet only Negro to cross the continent, placed before Matt a platter of ham and hot corn bread smothered in butter and honey.

"Astounding," said Lewis. "I'd sooner go twice to the Pacific than to try that—a winter like this last one."

"The weather was bad," conceded Matt. "But that helped some, too. The creatures got so miserable they just crowded around instead of wandering off."

"Anyway, a good job," said Clark. "I hope you'll think we did as good a job getting together your outfit. We went heavy on trapping equipment. With any luck you'll get into country where the beaver are so thick you can trap faster than you can trade the Indians out of them."

"I don't know how to thank you for taking so much trouble."

"Better not try," said Lewis. "At least not until you know what we're letting you in for. We're not helping you—we're using you. We have no compunction about using our friends. Look what we've just done to Drouillard. We literally confiscated the two busiest weeks of his life. Manuel Lisa was fit to be tied. Now we propose to use you."

"We took it for granted you've a mind to trade upriver this year," said Clark. "You can help us and your country as much as if you were in uniform and in command of a regiment if when you reach the Mandan you give them some strong talk on the order of that you gave the Pawnee. The Mandan are the most important tribe on the river at the moment. The Sioux are more numerous, more warlike, and more difficult, but they're not so far away and we can work on them from here. But the Mandan are above the Sioux—who will do everything they can to prevent you or any other trader from dealing with them—and they are near the Eng-

lish in Canada, who can get to them more easily with trade goods. If the English succeed in setting them against us as they already have the Sioux, we're blocked off from a thousand miles of river and without much chance of ever opening a route to Oregon. We must keep on good terms with the Mandan.

"I've no soldiers to send to maintain a post there. If I had I wouldn't do it. We don't want the Indians of the Far West to fear our military domination. We want them to value our friendship. The one feasible way to seek that is to teach them to depend upon us rather than the English for trade goods. One honest trader is worth more than a field battery in the kind of conquest we must make."

George Rogers Clark had enlarged upon this same thing. Their fledgling nation was competing with the old empires of Europe for the possession of a continent. In this contest its one resource was the individual character of its citizens. From the Atlantic to the Mississippi American sovereignty had traveled with the new settler. Across these vast treeless plains to the west it must depend upon the free trader and the trapper. "How about Manuel Lisa and the others?" Matt asked.

"We can hope they will help but we cannot depend on it. Manuel Lisa is bold, resourceful—honest, I think—but he is working only for Manuel Lisa. Most traders, quite naturally, are entirely interested in personal profit. If it proves profitable to cater to the Mandan they will do so. If something else appears more profitable they will do that. We need someone who can watch the English, who can catch the drift and significance of tribal politics, and one who is capable of keeping us fully informed.

"For example, within the month we are sending Shehaka home to his people. We have gone to much expense and trouble to impress him with the importance of the United States. He is the most influential Mandan chief and his return may give us an impregnable position among the Mandan. We're sending him with Sergeant Pryor and a military



guard. However, the Sioux will try hard to prevent his return and may succeed in doing so. If harm comes to him, this may place us in a far worse position than if we had never brought him East in the first place. If you, with Manuel Lisa's party, succeed in getting through and reaching the Mandan first, tell them Shehaka is coming. Make as much as you can of his Eastern visit. We want to get all the good out of that we can. If Pryor is stopped tell the Mandan we'll get Shehaka back to them sooner or later. I cannot advise you in advance of the situation, but I can rely upon you to meet it—whatever it is—because you understand what we're up against."

"The last use we made of you," put in Lewis, "was no wild-goose chase. All of Aaron Burr's boats and military stores have been seized along the Ohio and there's a Federal warrant following him down to Natchez. By now he's likely under arrest and on his way East to stand trial for treason."

"I hope I can be of use to you," said Matt.

Drouillard appeared in the doorway.

"I suppose you better start before Drouillard fidgets himself into a fever," said Clark.

"Manuel Lisa send word today he will go whether we come or do not come," said Drouillard.

Governor and General attended the traders to the waiting horses.

"I know now why Mr. Jefferson looked so strange when he saw me off," said Lewis. "He wanted to go too. It may be more blessed to give than to receive, but it's certainly more fun to go than to send."

As Matt rode away the sunlight of the earlier morning was displaced by an April shower sweeping in gusts up the narrow street before him. Passers-by scattered for the shelter of open doorways. The members of a Sioux delegation, chiefs and their wives lured to St. Louis to treat with the new governors, parading down the street to see the sights and to exhibit their finery, met the threat of wetting with more calm. Lest the rain damage their feathers and ornaments and fine

white doeskins they hastily removed their garments, wrapped them in blankets, and, stark-naked, continued their sight-seeing stroll, oblivious alike to the amused interest of white men and the scolding indignation of housewives.

This encounter at the outset with weather and Indians pleased Matt with the sense that again he was on his way. He was excited by the warmth of the captains' farewells and the confidence in him with which they had enlisted him in his country's service. His high spirits were sobered only when he reached the forks where the new military road to Bellefontaine veered away from the most westerly route to St. Charles. There was no time to go around by Bellefontaine and Riverhill to see Nora. Time, tide, the river, and Manuel Lisa waited for no man. He must keep on.

They rode hard. By the time they had passed the Natural Bridge he had composed a hundred notes of farewell to her. By the time they had passed St. Charles Rock he had discarded each version. There seemed nothing he could say that fitted both what he felt and what it was appropriate for him to say to her. He could hardly declare himself and demand that she wait for him. He had no way of knowing how long he might be gone. It was unfair to attempt to bind her. This thought, once it had occurred to him, pained him, yet with the pain there was a certain comfort, since it spared him the necessity of decision on this day so filled with the excitement of departure.

A simple solution relieved him. Once he had reported to Manuel Lisa, he could make Hipolite take him to Riverhill in his canoe and there say good-by to Nora in a normal and natural manner, thus escaping the demands of a written message in which sentiments unsaid were as important as words that were said. If the expedition had in the meantime set off, a little hard paddling in Hipolite's canoe would speedily overtake it.

By the time the Missouri came in sight he had this well settled in his mind. He found the water front at St. Charles

in a fearful uproar. Never before had so many of the sons, husbands, and fathers of St. Charles taken their leave on the same day. Never before had the community's celebration of its pain reached such a pitch of excitement. All who were not intoxicated with wine were intoxicated with emotion. Women and children were clinging, laughing and weeping, to their loved ones; devout grandmothers were praying; the priest was blessing the boats and hearing last-minute confessions; lovers were exchanging renewed vows; drunkards were fighting over forgotten grievances; boat songs vied with love songs; prayers, curses, vows, and lamentations alike were voiced from screaming throats in order to be heard at all in the midst of the tumult.

The keelboats were long since loaded and only this final confusion of farewell delayed the departure. Manuel Lisa, a black-browed demon of energy, was striding through the melee, breaking up embraces, retrieving children who had fallen into the water, throwing *engagés* bodily into boats.

Matt caught no glimpse of Hipolite anywhere in the excited throng. Then he came upon Ursule.

"There has been a mistake that is beyond belief terrible," she cried. "Hipolite is with your Nora. She is not at home, so there is no use for you to go there. He has taken her in his canoe across the Mississippi to meet the cattle. She thought thus to see you sooner."

There was no opportunity even to dwell upon his dismay. Manuel Lisa, discovering his presence, seized upon him. "Ha," he growled, "you did not come too soon!" He assigned Matt to be second in command of Drouillard's boat. "Push off," he commanded. "To go, there must be the start."

Matt began propping up the drunken boatmen and guiding their hands to the oars. The heavy keelboat, cast off, felt the grip of the current, the first confused splashing of the oars serving little more than to resist its being swept downstream. This was the start, and he was leaving without even writing a message to Nora.

Ursule waded into the water and called out to him. "She will ask me for word of you. What do you want me to tell her?"

"Tell her——" Matt shouted. He hesitated, still uncertain. "Tell her I will be back sooner than she thinks."

## CHAPTER XXV

AT THE outset, Matt's third voyage up the Missouri was marked by a personal ease and leisure in marked contrast to his earlier river experiences. The ascent was infinitely more laborious but the labor was performed by others.

The heavy keelboats grounded on every shallow, balked at every eddy, drifted sluggishly downward with every current. Aside from the rare occasions when a strong favoring wind permitted the spreading of sail, every foot of upward progress was gained only by the constant exhausting struggle of the boatmen. They strained at the oars and threw their weight against the poles, finding relief only in the even more demanding necessity of going over the side to drag and lift the boats along by hand or to resort to the backbreaking cordelle. Wading waist-deep in mud, hauling the slippery towline along slimy, root-encumbered banks, chilled by cold rains, baked by the sun, stifled at times by the foul miasma of putrefying buffalo carcasses, cutting a way through mile-long blockades of driftwood, they persisted with cheerful energy, finding often the spirit even to raise their gasping voices in interminable songs. The innocent, pleasure-loving French habitant, indolent and worthless at home, was capable of a sustained intensity of excitable effort in the wilderness that no other breed of men could rival.

But this labor was not for Matt. He was one of the *bossemen*. His duties were limited to hunting, when feasible, to supplement the *engagés'* regular ration of corn meal and tallow.

He was likewise spared the weight of responsibility.

Drouillard commanded the boat in which he sat and Manuel Lisa the fleet. These were men who neither needed nor permitted assistance in making decisions. To keep so large a formation of men and material in order under the difficulties imposed by the wilderness and the river and the incipient danger of Indian attack required the maintenance of an iron discipline. Disobedience was punished as sternly as on any ship of war at sea.

When young Antoine Bissonette, homesick for St. Charles, disregarded all warnings and deserted, Drouillard was sent in pursuit to bring him back. When he still refused to return Drouillard shot him. For this act Drouillard, when at length he returned to St. Louis, was promptly acquitted by a jury, for the people of Missouri Territory well understood the necessary rigors of the fur trade.

At the mouth of the Platte Bap was not waiting as Matt had hoped he might. Nor had a wandering Omaha hunter who had recently visited the Oto town heard anything about the traders wintering with the Pawnee nation. There had been some trouble this spring among the Pawnee, the Oto, and the Omaha, and very little exchange of news.

The Omaha did have other news of importance to Manuel Lisa. He had heard from the Ponca that the Sioux had negotiated a peace with the Aricara in order to persuade them to attack the Mandan. The Aricara lived in a permanent town on the banks of the Missouri above the Sioux and below the Mandan, and this situation if it developed meant the certain blockade of the upper river. Manuel Lisa fell into an immediate fever of impatience to get on up the river before it was too late.

He refused to agree to wait while Matt made the four-day journey to the Grand Pawnee town to find and bring back his partners. Matt argued that he could make the trip, get horses from the Pawnee, and overtake the boats at the Ponca town three hundred miles up the river. Manuel Lisa refused this as well.

"You stay behind," he pointed out with unanswerable

logic, "then anybody they think they can, too. The Aricara if they fight, then we need every man. So we keep every man."

To make certain of Matt's compliance he instructed Drouillard to watch Matt in camp that night and until they had re-embarked the next morning.

Matt understood and sympathized with Manuel Lisa's decision. It was the one he would have made in the same situation. He had no more wish to come to grips with Drouillard than with Bap or Clark himself. He knew Manuel Lisa's temper and Drouillard's unwavering loyalty to his commander. But he still was determined he would not leave Bap and Joe Thorn behind.

He was spared a decision by the appearance of a famed wanderer from over the horizon. Just at sunset a canoe with a single occupant came around the bend from upriver. For a time the canoe hovered in mid-channel while the stranger scrutinized the amazing spectacle of an entire fleet of keel-boats moored along this lonely strand. Then he began to paddle furiously for shore.

The stranger was the most extraordinary solitary adventurer of his time. He had already ventured more independently than any other man living, though he was only on the threshold of his astounding wanderings. He was John Colter.

Drouillard recognized him when he was yet at a distance. His shout threw the traders' camp, from Manuel Lisa to the youngest *engagé*, into a frenzy of excitement. All knew the story of John Colter. He had accompanied Lewis and Clark. That tremendous journey had not tired him. When upon their return they had gained the comparative security of the Mandan, Colter had asked to be discharged so that he might return alone to trap on the Yellowstone, among the approaches to the great mountains and along the fatal fringes of the Blackfoot country. His services had been so faithful that after some attempt to dissuade him the captains had acceded to his request. No one expected to hear of him again. But here he was after having spent months in that far,

little-known country toward which this new expedition was traveling.

Upon stepping, grinning, from his canoe, he was overwhelmed with questions. What kind of country was it? Were the Indians bad? Was there game? Were there beaver?

"Beaver?" he exclaimed. "Till you see that country you've never seen beaver. They're thicker there than ticks on a dead doe."

The men of Pizarro and Cortès, hearing advance reports of the wealth of the Aztec and the Inca, could have been no more elated than Colter's listeners. To them beaver was gold. A prime beaver skin was worth from six to eight dollars in St. Louis. A pack, five hundred. It was worth a man's while to spend months haggling with the lazy Indians of the lower Missouri to gain a pelt at a time. Colter was telling about a land where packs might be accumulated more rapidly than single skins on the Platte.

"'Course," remarked Colter, "out there the Blackfoot and the mountain bear they sure get in your hair."

But no one listened to this.

Matt heard, however, and saw his opportunity. That night when the camp had settled down he drew Colter aside. The others had been able to ask only the most general questions. Matt, primed by Clark's detailed account of the mountain country, knew precisely the most interesting questions to ask. Colter, centered on the attractions of the settlements to which after so long an absence he was at last making his way, began gradually to be intrigued again by the amazing land he had just left. The longer he talked, the more excited he became. Matt turned Colter's forthright mind to the further pleasure he might find in tutoring such outstanding figures as Manuel Lisa and Drouillard and in guiding them through dangers with which he alone was familiar. Colter forgot the beckoning comforts of St. Louis, the loneliness of his long wanderings, and his former impatience to return home. He fell asleep with his imagination fixed upon his return instead to mountain adventure.

At dawn Matt awakened Manuel Lisa.

"What would you give to have John Colter join your party?"

"This hand," said Manuel Lisa. He started to raise his right hand, hesitated, made an honest decision, and raised his left hand.

"Would you give me leave to go to the Pawnee and take care of my goods until I can catch up with you?"

"I would do that—and kiss you, besides, wherever you want."

Matt roused Colter.

"Tell Mr. Lisa you'll go with him."

"I will," said Colter cheerfully, "seein' as how I got no sense."

Matt bought the Omaha hunter's horse for no more than three times what it was worth and before noon of the next day he sighted the Grand Pawnee town. Though his approach had been observed, no one came to meet him. For an hour he had been aware of scattered riders on all the surrounding hilltops. He realized with more curiosity than alarm that care was being taken that he should not change his mind about coming on in. To find the Pawnee still acting so queerly could only mean that the effect of the Malgares visitation had been more lasting than Joe Thorn had anticipated.

When he reached the ball ground the distant riders converged upon him at a gallop while what seemed the entire population boiled suddenly out of town to surround him. There was much loud laughter and the laughter was scornful and taunting. The mounted warriors jostled him rudely and pushed against his tired horse, but there was at yet no expression of outright menace. He began now to be much alarmed about Bap and Joe.

Still there was neither assault nor greeting. No one either called him by name or charged him with being an enemy. There was merely the sense of some monstrous joke of which he alone was unaware and which was at his expense.



The crowd began pressing him toward the edge of town and then opened to disclose one of the communal woodpiles.

Here he discovered Bap and Joe Thorn cutting wood. They straightened and regarded him somberly without any sign of welcome. They were dirty, ragged, half-starved, but seemed so far to have suffered no serious injury. Cutting wood was women's work, however. No greater humiliation could have been visited on them.

When Matt leaped from his horse to greet them an old squaw with a gleeful shriek attempted to thrust an ax into his hand. This seemed the point of the joke. Matt had wandered innocently in to become another woodcutter. He pushed her away. The Pawnee waited, watching every change of expression on the faces of their reunited victims.

"This is the first time I am not glad when I see you," said Bap.

"These Pawnee—they're mean," explained Joe. "And I've seen some mean Indians. Shame you walked right in amongst 'em."

"You still got your gun," said Bap. "Before they take it shoot maybe one of them. It is better to fight than to be like us."

"Bap—he's meaner 'n a Pawnee," said Joe. "All I can do to hold him down. Still, it's only on account of him we're still alive. Women around town keep on sneaking grub to him, else we'd have tuckered out before now."

Matt had been looking past them while he listened, partly because he was ashamed to see the state they were in and partly because he wished to measure the temper of the Pawnee. There was nothing encouraging about this temper. Their amused hostility was more implacable than an angry hostility could have been.

"What happened?" he asked.

"When Bap got here," Joe explained, "she was already too froze-up to get back downriver. No reason to anyway, because Manuel Lisa was right. I did owe him for them goods." He realized the Pawnee were tiring of so much

mere conversation and hurried his account. "We put in a fair enough winter. Some of the Pawnee buck got a mite suspicious off and on 'bout where Bap spent his nights, but we got in a good season's trading. More'n enough to pay off Manuel. But the weather changed this spring when the Pawnee heard the Spanish had taken Pike and chucked him into a Mexican calaboose."

This was news. The Spanish must be in genuine earnest if they had dared to take by force a uniformed American officer while he was on official business. This was practically an act of war. No wonder the Pawnee were impressed by Spanish might and American weakness.

"So the Pawnee got it into their heads it was safe to have fun with Americans," concluded Joe. "We being the handiest, they started right in having fun with us."

A young brave, bored with the play's slow pace, made a sudden grab for Matt's rifle. Matt jerked it from his grasp and felled him with the butt. The crowd roared with pleased laughter. A pugnacious victim was more entertaining than a docile one. When Matt looked grimly around the circle many warriors ducked and dodged derisively as if in terror. Matt saw Seroka grinning scornfully.

"I want to talk to your father," Matt said. "Where is he?"

Seroka's grin became a laugh. After a second's reflection this seemed to him a good idea. He nodded and beckoned for them to follow him. The crowd took up the laugh. This formality promised to prolong the entertainment. The whole assembly, with the three white men at its center, pushed tumultuously through the streets of the town toward the central square. Presently they confronted old Characteris seated on the ground before the council house. He was grave and cold. Matt stared back at him with as much angry disapproval as if he were captor instead of captive.

"Has the great Characteris become so old he is unable to stand to greet a guest?" he asked.

Characteris gave no sign that he had heard the insult. His

gaze flickered over the three white men and moved on to Seroka.

"Why bring these berdaches to me?"

"Berdache" was the word in the traders' jargon applied to a certain type of man, common among all Indian nations, who by choice wore women's clothes and performed women's tasks, due to a physical lack of masculinity. Bap grunted as if at a knife thrust.

"They claim they have something important to say to you," explained Seroka.

The old chief regarded Matt with studied contempt. Matt's slighting reference to his age had cut deeply.

"What can they have to say?"

"What I have to say," said Matt, "is for the Pawnee nation to hear. Call your council."

The proposal caught the fancy of the crowd. This promised a third act for the play, an arena in which the victims could be baited leisurely and in detail. There was a surge toward the council house.

"The council house is for our friends," ruled Characteris. "The council will listen to you here."

The crowd opened a circle about Characteris and the white men. Pawnee of council rank squatted in the front row. The others pressed forward to see and listen. People climbed to the roofs of the earthen houses about the square, where they watched as from the galleries in a theater. There was none of the official solemnity of a proper council meeting. No pipe was lighted or passed. People were grinning and tittering and nudging one another. It was no more than the burlesque of a council.

Matt waited until they had quieted somewhat. "This is what I came to say," he began. "I came to tell the Pawnee who were once my friends that they are fools."

"And dogs," added Bap in a loud whisper, staring with malevolence at Characteris.

"Easy," counseled Joe Thorn. "Better they burn the wood we cut than burn us."

"Now I will tell you why the Pawnee are fools," continued Matt. "They are fools because they choose to be the friends of the Spaniards. They think the Spaniards are great because they have heard the Spaniards with hundreds of men have seized Lieutenant Pike, who had only twelve men. They think the Americans are small because they do not march out every year with many soldiers to make empty threats. They think the Spaniards are strong and the Americans are weak. They think it is wiser to be friends of the Spaniards and enemies of the Americans. That is why the Pawnee are fools."

He paused. Seroka, without rising, gave him a sarcastic answer: "It may be true. The Pawnee are fools because they are friends to the wolf and not to the mouse." This retort restored the assembly's good humor and its mood to be amused.

"Seroka, who was formerly my friend," replied Matt, "has ears to hear and eyes to see. If he listens when the Pawnee go to hunt or to war he hears the sound of many guns. If he looks about him here and now he sees bags of powder and shot, looking-glasses, strings of blue beads, fine steel knives, copper kettles. The Pawnee are rich. Every warrior has his own gun. Every cooking fire its iron pot. Where do these things come from? From the Spaniards? From Santa Fe or Chihuahua? No. Everything comes from St. Louis. Everything the Pawnee want comes by the goodwill of the Americans. Do the Pawnee then plan from now on to go without these things?"

Characteris himself answered with a growl. "The hearts of the Americans are set upon trade. When we invite them they will crawl with goods to the doors of our lodges."

Matt strode slowly around the circle, addressing various councilors personally, emphasizing his words with vigorous gestures.

"Characteris, who was once my friend, is old and full of wisdom. But he sits nodding before his house. He no longer

sees what comes to pass beyond the rooftops of his town. This is the season for trade. Have traders come to the Pawnee? They have not. They have heard the Pawnee are no longer their friends. They say let the Pawnee trade with their friends the Spaniards. Very many traders are coming up the river this year. More than ever before. But they are not coming to the Pawnee." He paused. Jealousy of rival tribes was the most easily stirred of all Indian emotions.

"The Pawnee know Manuel Lisa well. Often he has visited them with goods. But not this year. Manuel Lisa is on the river with seven keelboats." Characteris grunted loudly enough for all to hear. This was an unprecedented trading fleet. "But this year Manuel Lisa is taking his goods to trade with the Sioux and the Aricara and the Mandan. The Pawnee know Pierre Chouteau. He is following with five keelboats. He has no time for the Pawnee. He is going far north to trade along the way opened by the two captains. After Chouteau is coming Sergeant Pryor with soldiers to escort Shehaka, the Mandan chief, to his home. Shehaka has been taken to visit the Great Chief of the Americans on the shores of the Eastern Ocean. It is not a chief of the Pawnee who has been thus honored. The river is covered with boats. But all are passing by the Pawnee."

Matt sat down as calmly as if the proceedings were of no further interest to him. Characteris sprang to his feet.

"How do we know this man is telling the truth? What he tells has never happened before. He is surely a liar."

Matt replied without rising.

"If the Pawnee would know who passes them by, let them send to the Omaha. The Omaha live on the river. They see all who go up."

This provoked a stormy discussion during which more ill will was exhibited by various factions of the Pawnee toward one another's points of view than toward the white men, but at length a delegation headed by Seroka was selected. Women and boys ran out into the hills to round up the necessary

horses. Though it was already late in the day, the delegates selected their best dress and ornaments and set out without further delay.

The white men were still to be held pending the return of the delegates. But they were awarded certain guarded privileges. Joe Thorn's lodge was restored to his use, together with his wives, and the lodge was provided with food. The white men were now more hostages than prisoners and could wait in safety and comfort, at least, for the report from the Omaha.

When they were alone Bap embraced Matt. "This," Bap informed Joe, "this is my boy."

"He didn't do so bad," acknowledged Joe. "Don't know I've ever heard anybody better at palavering with Indians since the time Georgie Croghan talked the Wynandot out of burning me." Joe's two ugly wives sidled in, simpering coyly. "Leastways we'll eat good," Joe proclaimed, "whilst we're waiting for them to figure out how much you lied to them."

"I didn't lie so much as you think," explained Matt. "Lisa and Chouteau and Pryor are all going up the river this summer. Seroka will learn that from the Omaha."

"No!" marveled Joe. "The fur business sure is picking up."

"Naturally I lied about their reasons. Nobody is avoiding the Pawnee because of the way they've been making eyes at the Spaniards. Nobody knew about it. Everybody's going way up because they think they can get more beaver up there. They can."

"You figure once we shake loose here we might do some traveling ourselves, eh?"

"It'll be too late to catch up with Manuel Lisa along the river. He has our goods. What do you think about taking horses and making it overland to the Mandan?"

Joe's eyes brightened. "We'd sure see a sight of country."

## CHAPTER XXVI

MATT might have exacted more favorable terms from the Pawnee had he been content to linger for the leisurely deliberation required for any serious negotiation with Indians. But when, after weeks of delay, the delegates, sullenly convinced, returned from the Omaha, Matt was too impatient to be off to argue long. The Pawnee were reluctantly impressed with the advisability of placating Matt, and through him other American traders, but Matt was even more impressed by the remaining faint hope of overtaking Manuel Lisa at the Aricara country and the imperative necessity of rejoining him before he had left the Mandan.

He drove as hard a bargain as time permitted. He obliged the Pawnee to supply him horses of Joe Thorn's selection for the overland journey. He extracted from them a promise to send a conciliatory delegation to wait upon Lewis and Clark in St. Louis. It would have cost many weeks to enforce a search throughout the tribe for his scattered trade goods, originally taken from the Omaha bridegrooms by Seroka, partially reassembled during the winter by Bap and Joe Thorn, and confiscated again in the spring with the news of Pike's capture, but he did manage before leaving to impress the Pawnee with the conception that the famous two captains, now the American governors of the Western frontier, were his special friends.

When once more free and in the company of Bap and Joe he rode out over the Wolf River Hills to the Northwest, he felt a tremendous upsurge of spirit. Not since the river attack by the Sioux had he been able to turn his face forward. Now he was rid again of dependence upon others. Now he was at the head of his own party and once more before him lay the unknown.

The river was no longer the unknown. Since the return of Lewis and Clark it had been reported upon in detail and had become a route the principal features of which were familiar

to many men. But of what lay back of the rugged bluffs bordering the wide river bottom no water-borne traveler had gained more than an occasional glimpse. Men had viewed the fringes of this strange treeless land, as mariners had looked out upon the Atlantic before Columbus, but they knew as little of the actual nature of what lay beyond their view.

When the three men emerged from the rolling tree-dotted hills to traverse the first immense level expanse of the Great Plains, they fell silent, almost shrinking from the impact of the immeasurable distance stretching away from them on all sides. Like sailors on the boundless ocean, the navigation of this grass-waved sea of earth made them first feel their own insignificance and then enabled them to draw from this humility of spirit a new sense of their own importance in that they had dared to venture at all so far out into this space.

The first day there came, like a mighty omen, a demonstration of the terror and the majesty of this land where nothing intervened to bar the meeting of the heavens above with the earth beneath. A thunderstorm gathered in the northwest, its approach a towering spectacle long evident before it broke. It struck with a rush of rain, a howl of wind, and a roar of thunder. The flat plain offered no target to attract the lightning, which began to strike simply and directly straight downward into the ground. Belatedly realizing that their own bodies were the most inviting objects projecting upward from the surface, the travelers hastily forced their horses to lie down and themselves stretched out prone while all around them thunderbolts crackled into the earth, raising spouts of mud and water. Matt found himself laughing wildly and replying to each thunderous explosion with defiant yells of elation.

As their journey continued they early came to recognize the nature of the two greatest aids to man's travel on the plains—the sun and stars in the sky overhead and the lowly buffalo chip, the dried dung of the buffalo, beneath his feet. Without the sun and stars the man who would cross this vast



expanse must have lost all sense of direction, since there were no landmarks, no other signs to guide his course. Without the buffalo chip he must have gone without fire to cook his meat, since in this treeless country there was no stick of wood for fuel.

They became familiar with the vast unfolding panorama of the plains. Viewed through the clear transparent air, distance lost all meaning. Billowing, high-piled clouds, as separate and compact as ships, swung past overhead in stately procession. The flat earth stretched away until it met the sky, the grass a glowing brown and yellow in the mid-summer sun, here pleasantly shadowed beneath the passing clouds, there a brilliant green where moisture persisted in hollows. This flatness was never monotonous, for the prospect was perpetually varied. There were the buffalo wallows, dry and dusty now. There was in the early morning the distant column of vaporous haze, signifying the presence beyond the horizon of another buffalo herd. There were the faraway ascending spirals of waterfowl, indicating the existence of a pond or a marsh in some fold of the plains. There were the tremendous, startling towers of elk antlers erected by successful Indian hunters as propitiatory offerings. There were the strange circles of stones, like giants' necklaces left by Indian hunters who had assembled them to hold down the skirts of their skin tepees when in winter the frozen ground prevented the use of tent pegs.

And everywhere thronged in inestimable number the game for which the grass of the plains provided such an abundant subsistence. This game could scarcely be considered wild. The passing travelers were greeted less with alarm than with a kind of gentle curiosity. Grazing animals no more than lifted their heads to stare ruminatively before resuming their feeding or occasionally, their interest aroused, for a time followed the horses, sniffing the strange new scent.

Invariably across the foreground lay a prairie-dog village, the conical earthen mounds like a miniature Pawnee town,

the little rodents, standing upright on their housetops, seeming semihuman in their chattering and scolding excitability, waiting to peer and to criticize until the last moment before whisking into the security of their burrows below. Herds of antelope, graceful, delicately agile, unbelievably swift, raced back and forth, seeming more often than not to be running for the sheer joy of movement, yet for all their native timidity exhibiting a curiosity so uncontrollable that they could be lured within a stone's throw by the display of a handkerchief fluttering at the end of a ramrod. Huge, ungainly, long-striking elk, the does and their fawns in herds of a hundred or more, the stags by themselves in lesser groups, their horns at this season in all the magnificence of their full growth, idly watched the passing intruders. Packs of fat and indolent wolves lolled about the fringes of every herd of antelope, elk, and buffalo, the cruel and constant shepherds of these flocks of the plains, waiting to take their toll of the young, the sick, the maimed, and the mired.

But it was the buffalo that dominated the panorama. They had congregated in incredible numbers. This was their rutting season and the earth shook beneath the violence of their amours. The odor of their excitement was heavy in the dusty air. The bellowing of the bulls, boastful, belligerent, enraged, rose to a constant, pulsating roar. The cows, wayward and provocative, milled about in restless groups, seeming deliberately to promote conflict among their suitors. The bulls' struggles for supremacy were made terrifying to behold by the size and ferocity of the antagonists. Rivals often continued bloodily tearing each other's flesh with their strong stubby horns until both were at the point of death. On every side these spectacular conflicts were in process, each followed by the victor's lusty enjoyment of the fruits of his triumph. At times whole segments of the herd, numbering thousands of animals, carried away by elemental excitement, united to charge in fierce, blind ecstasy for miles over the plain in a thundering resistless assault from which all lesser creatures fled in terror. At other times the horsemen

rode slowly for hours through aisles in the vast herd, the buffalo, absorbed in their savage procreation, paying no attention whatever to the intrusion.

Days passed. They kept far from the river to lessen the chance of meeting some roving band of Sioux. As they continued north and west the land became drier. Wide stretches of sagebrush and greasewood occasionally replaced the grass. Low, barren sandhills broke into the flat expanse of the plains. They entered the Bad Lands, that grotesquely eroded country where every trickle of running water tore a deep, raw gash in the rootless earth. At length there appeared on the horizon the dark mass of the Black Hills, crowned as always by its panoply of summer storms, regarded by the Plains Indian as a land of spirits, miraculously freshened by rains in the driest seasons, mysteriously clothed by forest, a land to which he bore offerings and sacrifices to leave piously among its shadowy defiles.

Joe Thorn regarded this mountainous apparition with calm. Guided only by the hearsay of Pawnee who themselves had never ventured half so far, he had led the way to this, their first great landmark, as directly as an experienced navigator feels his way through the fog by dead reckoning.

Having sighted the Black Hills, they turned from the northwest to the northeast to strike toward Joe's conception of the location of the Aricara towns on the Missouri. Again his strange instinct for direction was vindicated. When they rode out on the crest of a low hill to see the river below them, they saw also the two Aricara towns on the bank.

They saw more than that. They saw a pitched battle in progress, the roll of musketry and the yells of the combatants disrupting the wilderness quiet. Indians on horses were galloping out of the lower Aricara town, firing on a fleet of boats manned by white men. The boats were endeavoring to escape downstream and the horsemen were racing to cut off that escape. The travelers assumed this must be Manuel Lisa's party journeyed upstream as far as the Aricara, that it had encountered trouble there and, faced with overwhelm-

ingly superior strength as traders must always be among the Indians, was now endeavoring to withdraw.

Joe began to mutter angrily. "I wouldn't know a Rickaree from a Chinaman, but if some of them Indians ain't common ordinary Sioux I'm one myself."

The battle swept nearer so that the participants, no longer tiny distant figures of little human significance, began to appear as men of flesh and blood to whom life was important. Matt caught a glimpse aboard one of the barges of a bright-yellow coat of the unmistakable hue of Shehaka's and then saw the faded and travel-stained uniforms of the men crouched and firing behind the bulwarks. These boats were manned not by traders but by soldiers. They were witnessing the first battle in history between the United States Army and the Indians of the plains.

"It's Pryor's force," said Matt. "He was to come up the river this summer to see the Mandan chief safely home."

Joe nodded. "That accounts for the Sioux mixing into the mischief. Likely them same English traders from Prairie du Chien that got me run out of the Sioux country got their fingers in this."

The mounted Indians, racing along the bank, keeping up a running fire with the boats, were making for a point jutting out into the river at the foot of the hill where they might cut off the retreat of the slower-moving craft. Matt knew how important Lewis and Clark considered the safe return of the Mandan chief. By all appearances the attempt was about to end in disaster. Whether or not the English were involved, the effect would be the same. The Mandan would be infuriated by the American failure to guard their chief and their resentment added to the normal hostility of Aricara and Sioux would close the Missouri to American travel.

Galloping at the head of the Indian horsemen was a Sioux chief with a white headband who seemed to be the leading spirit on the side of the attackers. As this active figure approached the foot of the hill Joe snorted with new animus.

"I know him," he declared. "The critter always used to run with the English. First time I ever seen him without a red coat on his back."

Joe was fingering the trigger of his rifle. Matt was eager to strike some blow that might aid Pryor, but they were too few to charge down the slope and too far away to open fire effectually.

"No hurt to take a try," Joe said.

He dismounted, rested his rifle along the horse's back, and waited until the Indian horseman reached the foot of the hill. It was still an impossibly long shot and a racing target. But when the chief rolled on the ground his headband was no longer white.

The Indians, dismayed by the fall of their leader, recoiled from the shores of the promontory, and before they had recovered their aggressive spirit the fleeing boats had rounded the point to gain a secure avenue of retreat. Pryor's expedition had suffered a disheartening repulse instead of irreparable disaster.

"That was a shot," marveled Bap. "No one will believe when we tell them. I do not believe myself though myself I see it."

The partners hastily vacated the hilltop before the confused Indians realized the source of this unexpected assault from their rear. Circling widely around the Aricara towns, they came upon one of the Aricara horse herds in a valley among the hills. The guards had deserted their duties to observe the battle. Joe pulled in his horse.

"Them Mandan," he said, "they won't know us from Adam. But they'll likely take us on their laps if we show up with a string of Aricara horses."

They cut out fifty of the Aricara best and continued northward to the Mandan. Long before they sighted the Indian metropolis their approach was noted by alert videttes posted on every commanding hilltop to give warning of either of the two eventualities upon which the life of the nation so much depended, the appearance of buffalo or of enemies.

The value of Joe's forethought was made immediately apparent by the excited behavior of the sentinels. That white men should come from this direction was in itself a sufficient phenomenon. That they should come driving a herd of Aricara horses was a sensation. On every hilltop fluttering blankets snapped and jerked as the news was semaphored ahead to the towns.

Joe, more expert in the universal sign language of the plains than either Matt or Bap, rode a little apart where he could be more clearly seen, his hands and arms sawing and cutting the air in a reiteration of their message.

"We are friends. We come from Red Hair's town with news of your chief Shehaka. We have stolen the horses of your enemy the Aricara. We have killed your enemy the Sioux. We are brothers of the Mandan."

The sentinels, yelling in their amazement one to another, watching every movement of the white men, circled warily closer. Matt and Bap rode away from their horse herd, gesturing their willingness to place the animals in the charge of their Mandan friends. This was accepted as proof of the strangers' sincerity, and soon a dozen young braves were riding alongside the newcomers, peering curiously at their equipment and persons, grinning, gesticulating, and opening conversations in sign language and scraps of downriver dialects.

By the time they had mounted the rise from which they could see the nearest of the Mandan towns the growing procession was further augmented by scores of warriors galloping out to meet and see for themselves the ambassadors from the distant land of the famous two captains. These later arrivals brought excellent news. Manuel Lisa pressing forward many days in advance of Pryor, had managed to break through the Aricara and Sioux blockade and was now at the Mandan towns.

The partners walked their horses slowly down the slope, delaying their arrival to give the sensation of their appearance a chance to grow. For Manuel Lisa was not waiting

for them by choice but because he was restrained by the Mandan, who were unwilling to permit him to go on westward, where there was the risk of his furnishing trade goods to their enemies, the Assiniboin and the Blackfeet.

"Do Manuel Lisa no harm," Matt observed complacently, "to find out that if they let him go through it's because we were able to work it out for him."

"Our luck she change," pronounced Bap with enthusiasm.

"A man can't tell about his luck," said Joe. "That is, not for quite a spell after he has it. Best luck I ever had was one day when my horse kicked me. Busted my leg and my rifle all at one lick. Then he run off. Froze both my feet and like to starved crawling back to my cabin. I found out then the Shawnee had burned the cabin. If I'd have got back when I counted on they'd have burned me too. Worst luck I ever had was one day catching catfish I snagged my hook on a pack of prime beaver that must have washed down when somebody's canoe upset. A man in Pittsburgh gave me fifty-two pounds twelve shillings for what I'd pulled up in less'n a minute. I was earning four pound a month them days and what I made in that one minute spoiled me after that for common wages. I ain't done a real honest day's work since."

Matt speculated briefly upon his former luck. The first time he had been turned back had made him an independent trader and gained him Bap's friendship. The second time had brought him into closer association with the two captains and through his contact with them and with the old General had given him in a week a comprehension of his country's situation he might not otherwise have been able to grasp in a lifetime. Even the miracle of meeting Nora had stemmed from the ill luck of losing his rifle.

Then the procession wound out of the willows into the edge of the town and he ceased to consider any luck but his luck at the moment, which he found overwhelmingly good. For so long he had thought of the Mandan country as a place

infinitely remote. Now he was here. His formidable journey was at the halfway mark.

The famous Mandan five towns, including those of their Minataree and Soulier allies, situated on the Missouri where after its long northward stretch the river's course swung to the west, formed a center of Indian culture to rival the towns of the Iroquois in the East and those of the Cherokee and the Creek in the South. The Mandan, unlike other Indians of the West, was no rover of the plains. His towns were surrounded by the gardens and cemeteries characteristic of a settled and permanent population. He had no need to wander to satisfy his wants or to flee from his fears. The Mandan way of life was to wait for the fruits of life and death to come to him. At hand were his fields and gardens where he planted his corn and pumpkins and beans and the slopes where in macabre array he deposited his dead on scaffolds. The river brought down driftwood for his fires. Sections of the vast buffalo herd of the plains approached often enough to provide meat and hides within sight of his drying racks and stretching frames. His very enemies brought war to the Mandan doorstep. Primitive man's common assumption that his own people were more important than any other had some basis in the case of the Mandan.

Compared to the nomad villages of skin tepees and bark wigwams of neighboring nations, the Mandan town possessed the architectural permanence and dignity of Rome. The dwellings were ranged closely around the great square that was the center of the town's communal life, the site of games, councils, national assemblies, and the extraordinary Mandan religious ceremonies, which were more spectacular and cruel than those of any other nation north of Mexico. Each house was a huge domelike earthen structure supported on great hewn beams and rafters, in some cases with a roof span of as much as ninety feet. Within there was room for the householder, his family, furniture, guests, and dogs, together with his horse herd, which was brought in at night for protection against the elements and enemy raiders. The



house was a strong fortress as well, with thick walls impenetrable by any missile less than a cannon ball.

The Mandan population rushed to the vantage of their housetops the better to observe the entry of the white strangers. Looking up at the painted faces and decorated figures of this pack of savage humanity and, higher still, dangling and fluttering from the tops of tall display poles, at the flaunted scalp trophies of the warriors, the emblazoned shields and heraldic emblems of chiefs, and the grotesque effigies and masks of medicine men, Matt could have been stirred by no deeper excitement were he a medieval traveler entering at last upon the fabled capital of Prester John.

He had come far. The Shining Mountains seemed now surely but just beyond the horizon.

## CHAPTER XXVII

THE council droned on interminably. Again and again Manuel Lisa, a master of the art of Indian negotiation, rose to his feet to renew his arguments, appeals, protestations, striving each time to present in more acceptable terms his plea for permission to proceed with his expedition past the five towns and on to the westward. Each time there ensued a long silence, broken only by the complacent rustle of the eagle tail and turkey-feather fans of the impassive Indian councilors, before at length another Mandan or Minatареe dignitary rose to make the unvarying reply that their hearts would be immeasurably saddened were their good friends the traders to depart from their midst.

Manuel Lisa's dark face grew darker. Matt could see that only the habit of patience developed in years of dealing with Indian vexations enabled him to control his temper, even though he was well aware that the property and the lives of himself and his followers might depend on his forbearance. The trader stood once more and in blunter terms than he had previously used made what he declared was his last offer.

As a token of good faith the traders would leave a full half of their goods here subject to forfeit if on their western journey they proved guilty of any act inimical to the interests of the Mandan.

A discreet smile flickered around the council circle. To Manuel Lisa's mortification, his offer was received not as a proof of sincerity but as a betrayal of weakness. The Mandan saw no occasion to be content with half when they were already in virtual possession of the whole. Kakoakis, better known to the traders as Le Borgne or One-Eye, head chief of the Minataree and in the absence of Shehaka the most influential figure in the five towns, heaved his huge bulk upright. Heretofore he had not spoken, and that he chose now to voice the Indian reply was evident that the negotiation had reached its crisis. His good eye gleamed and the sightless one, covered by an opaque white film, added a peculiar ferocity to the natural ugliness of his countenance. Instead of speaking according to convention from his position in the circle, he strode dramatically across the open space to confront not Manuel Lisa but Matt, seated beside him.

"What says the white friend of Shehaka?" Kakoakis demanded. "He has talked with Shehaka during the many moons the chief has been far from his own people. Does he think Shehaka would wish us to send trade goods to our enemies?"

To the savage cunning of this question there could be no successful answer. To admit Shehaka would favor a denial of Manuel Lisa's plea was to betray the traders' interests, while to claim that he would agree was to undermine Shehaka's reputation among his own people and thus advance Kakoakis' hopes of assuming the absent chief's authority.

Matt rose quickly, stepped around the towering Kakoakis, and addressed his reply to the council. Less adept than Manuel Lisa or Joe Thorn in the sign language, the necessarily slow-paced care with which he was forced to select

the gestures to phrase his meaning served to add emphasis to his words.

"Shehaka is very wise," said Matt. "When he returns to his people he will be able to speak for himself. I do not speak even for myself. I but tell the Mandan what they already know. The Mandan know that my partners and I did not come by the river. We came by land. We came on horses from the country of the Pawnee and we came in half the time it took Manuel Lisa to come by river. This year you can stop American traders who come by the river. But next year they will come by land and they will pass by far from the Mandan. They will take all their goods to the Crow and the Cheyenne and the Assiniboin and the Blackfeet. You can stop them this year, but next year they will bring no goods to the Mandan."

Matt's final gesture was a simple extemporaneous one indicating that whatever he held in his hand had slipped from his grasp. He stepped back past Kakoakis to return to his place. Kakoakis seized his arm and shook him violently. "This man is a fool," he bellowed. "We all know the Americans own no horses. They have only boats. They know only the river."

Little heed was paid to him. The council had lost all sense of decorum. Each man was debating vigorously with his neighbor. The Mandan common people, looking on from the surrounding housetops, began to swarm down into the square, the better to see and listen. Manuel Lisa struck Kakoakis' hand from Matt's arm.

"Come," he said to Matt. "We go now to camp."

Manuel Lisa had kept his men and property on an island in mid-river, to make it more difficult for the *engagés* to consort with the Mandan women during the progress of the delicate negotiations, and for the sake of defense in the event the negotiations broke down.

"But wait, give them a chance to talk it over," protested Matt, absorbed in observing the effect of his bold threat on the members of the council.

"You have made the gamble," said Manuel Lisa. "Maybe a good throw—maybe no. No matter. It is now too late to change it. Now we must act so we seem to have no care how the council talk."

Matt nodded. Joe Thorn, who had accompanied him, and the three traders who had constituted Manuel Lisa's retinue closed in around them and the little group pushed a way along the narrow street toward the river front. Kakoakis raised his voice in violent demand that the withdrawal be prevented. But the council had passed from indecision to utter confusion. The informal and democratic government of the Mandan was incapable of taking any sudden action on the spur of the moment.

The populace, sensing this official indecision, acted under the swift impulse of herd instinct. If the whites were to be robbed, each member of the crowd was eager to gain his share. If they were to be permitted to withdraw, there were gifts to be demanded, petty blackmail to be levied. Men, women, and children surged about the white party, grinning ingratiatingly at first, extending their hands for presents, begging shamelessly. Soon some of the bolder were snatching at the buttons on Manuel Lisa's coat, at Joe Thorn's hat, at Matt's bullet pouch. To these savages, the white men's most minor possessions were priceless treasures.

"I've had this hat a long time," muttered Joe, "and I ain't ready to give it away yet."

"Be sure you do not hit somebody," said Manuel Lisa, vigorously thrusting off the hands clutching at his clothing. "Now is not the good time to have the fight."

The six men clung to each other and pressed forward, managing to make progress because they drove with sustained purpose against the fluctuating pressure of the milling crowd. But once they had emerged into the open on the riverbank all progress ceased. The efforts of the hundreds on the outskirts of the gathering to shove inward to the center of interest jammed the whole mass so forcibly together

that white men and Indians were locked unwillingly in one another's embrace.

"I ain't worried so much about my hat now," said Joe, trying in vain to look down. "Some varmint's getting my pants."

Matt worked one hand free and gripped a boy's fingers that were tugging at his hunting knife. Crushed against his chest was a very old and evil-smelling Minataree, the frayed and bristling feathers of whose headdress scratched Matt's face. Against his back he could feel the flattened and squirming contours of a fat squaw. From somewhere around his feet rose the screams of a trampled child. All his life Matt had heard discussed the various ways a man might suffer at the hands of Indians. But he had not foreseen the likelihood of being squashed like a bug in a crowd of them.

"Rest *tranquille*." Manuel Lisa's low calm voice came clearly through all the uproar. "Drouillard will know what to do."

Drouillard did know what to do. He was in command of the keelboat lying offshore that had brought the traders' delegation to the council meeting. His boatmen stood up and began ostentatiously to go through the motions of loading their rifles, which were already loaded and ready. Drouillard himself knelt in the bow and swung the swivel of the cannon around to bear on the crowd ashore. The Mandan were well acquainted with the nature of the little cannon. The two captains had had such a gun and during their wintering here had often caused it to be fired, to the mingled alarm and entertainment of their hosts. Those in the crowd nearest the water began scrambling away from the direction to which the swivel pointed. Others became aware of the threat. The whole press of Indians loosened, disintegrated, seemed to melt away. The six white men splashed out into the water and crawled aboard the keelboat.

"Pull hard," said Manuel Lisa. "This is still not the time to hit somebody."

The boat drew away rapidly and was well out of bowshot

before the leaderless mob, most of them unarmed, had recovered sufficiently to make any belligerent gesture.

Climbing into the keelboat, Matt had caught no glimpse of Bap among the forty men aboard. When they disembarked on the island he made sure Bap was not among them.

"What happened to Bap?" he asked Drouillard.

For the first time in Matt's experience with him Drouillard betrayed a flicker of an ordinary man's occasional uncertainty. "He went ashore. About an hour before you come back. He say you have forget something. He say he must take it to you. I let him go."

Matt stared across at the Mandan town, now buzzing like a disturbed hornets' nest. He knew Bap too well to need further enlightenment. Bap had been disappointed when he was left behind with the boat's crew. Becoming increasingly bored with the dull waiting in the anchored boat, Bap had hoodwinked Drouillard and gone alone into the town. Matt could only surmise the mischief in which he was by now involved—if he was still alive.

Joe Thorn nudged him. "Better listen to this."

Manuel Lisa had climbed on a barrel and was surveying the men gathered around him. He was nominally their leader and by force of character well equipped to lead them, but all except the boatmen were free hunters, trappers, and traders, disposed in a crisis to make their own decisions.

"This is what I say," said Manuel Lisa. "Maybe the Indians let us go. Maybe they do not. So I say tomorrow morning—no matter if they say yes or if they say no, no matter what—we go."

This proposal drew growls of assent. Manuel Lisa jumped down from the barrel, his council of war so soon concluded. Matt seized him by the arm.

"Bap's still in town. We can't go and leave him there."

Manuel Lisa looked toward the town reflectively. "Better we lose one man than many," he decided. "We fight on the river—maybe we get away. We fight in the town—we get nowhere."

"I don't mean for everybody to go after him," said Matt. "I mean I'm going."

Joe Thorn was listening at his elbow. "He means Joe Thorn and him is going."

Manuel Lisa rubbed his chin in further thought. He nodded. "Good. Maybe you find Bap—maybe not. But anyway you find how the Indians feel, and that is worth two men. Only wait one hour. Maybe they settle down some."

They waited an hour while they took turns watching the town through Manuel Lisa's battered old telescope. There were presently fewer signs of excitement, even around the central square, the seat of governmental decision. Most of the inhabitants seemed to be returning to their normal occupation or lack of occupation.

"Go now," said Manuel Lisa, "and see what happens."

Matt and Joe embarked in a Mandan bullboat, a contraption shaped like a bowl and formed by stretching sewn buffalo hides around a frame of bent willow struts. Ordinary paddling merely caused it to revolve, and it was so light that it tended to drift with the current. It required the hardest kind of work to angle a course across the channel toward the Mandan water front. When they had struggled beyond the swifter water in midchannel Matt was able to look up again.

The late summer evening was darkening into twilight. Smoke from cooking fires drifted lazily upward in the still, warm air. Women were coming in from their labors in the fields, herdboys driving the horses in for the night, warriors lounging and gossiping on housetops. Everyone not otherwise occupied seemed to be bathing in the river, as was the Mandan custom in pleasant weather each morning and evening.

Matt looked sharply for some glimpse of Bap on the strand. If no harm had come to him and he were still free to move about, he might be expected to be strolling along the water front, taking advantage of this opportunity to

make a quick inspection of the persons of the Mandan maidens. For the women as unhesitatingly as the men dropped their clothes on the bank before wading into the water.

The nearer bathers were observing the approach of the bullboat with interest. Some began to wave and to make welcoming gestures.

"They're making out like they want to be friends again," said Joe.

Matt grunted. "Then it must be they haven't discovered yet what Bap's up to."

But they were not suffered to land without a sudden assault, at least upon their dignity. A dozen Mandan girls, sliding through the water like mermaids, their long hair rippling and glistening behind them, raced to meet the visitors. Shrieking their laughing threats, they set to rocking the frail bullboat and splashing its crew with water, until the white men paid the demanded tribute, doling out to each of their tormenters a trinket or a few beads. Triumphant then, the saucy pirates swam alongside, pushing and towing the boat into the shallows, where they emerged from the water and carried their victims bodily to land.

"I've had all kinds of treatment from Indians," said Joe, "but nothing easier to stand for than this."

The Mandan on the beach seemed to harbor no memory of the afternoon's excitement. Like children, they appeared to have passed readily from one mood to another, in their subsequent contentment dismissing from their minds even the occasion for their former discontent.

Inquiries concerning Bap brought many responses. He had been seen here and there. Several bystanders volunteered to aid in the search. No one seemed ill at ease under the questioning of Matt and Joe. No one seemed to find anything unusual in the sudden return of the white men who had left so recently under the shadow of their aimed firearms.



"Probably the way they handled Bap," said Matt, "until they got him out of sight of the river."

"One way to find out," said Joe. "All we got to do is keep on going till they start to handle us different."

They climbed the bank and walked slowly into the town. Still the Mandan passing in the street appeared to attach no special significance to their return. Around them the normal life of the community flowed on.

In the deepening shadows the bathers began streaming up from the river. Young women strolled through the streets, trailing their garments behind them while their bodies dried. Some pressed on decorously to the sanctuary of their houses. Others permitted importunate young men to snatch their clothes.

Other cries of laughter and excitement came from the opposite side of town, where the younger and more prepossessing of the women working in the fields were belatedly returning, their homeward progress retarded until now by the attentions of the young warriors it was necessary to post each day about the gardens to defend the women from lurking Assiniboin or Sioux raiders, a guard duty much sought after, for the sentinel had the daylong opportunity to court the favor of the damsel of his choice and the seclusion and privacy of the cornfield in which to enjoy it.

With the coming of night a spirit of ever freer license was released among the unmarried of the town. The bathers from the river and the workers from the fields forgathered with the young men in the streets and on the housetops. Courting to no purpose beyond the pleasure of the moment was the principal occupation of the young Mandan male. It was the golden age, likewise, for the Mandan girl, faced with the prospect of a future of married drudgery. From time to time pairs drew aside to embrace in the very shadow of their homes without heed to who might be observing. An occasional gallant, not finding the one of his preference in the streets, stationed himself before her house to describe

in endless love songs the fever of his desire and to plead with her to come out to him. Another suitor climbed on his beloved's rooftop to direct his plaintive plea down the smoke vent of her family's house. One bacchanalian naked group ran through the streets, singing, laughing, teasing, dancing, pursuing one another. Many of the Mandan were quite pale-skinned, some even having blue eyes and red hair, and some of the forms flitting past in the darkness seemed to Matt startlingly like the figures of white women.

"Livelier'n a runaway camp meeting," said Joe.

But Matt at the moment was moved only by his burning resentment of Bap's unparalleled foolishness. They had worked hard to come this far. After so many exertions they had won the opportunity to make the last dash to the great mountains. Bap had thrown all this away, in pursuit of a purpose no more sensible than to participate in these silly caperings.

Matt persisted in the search, while Joe, at his elbow, watched warily for the first sign of the hostility they momentarily expected. Still no effort was made to impede their hunt. Patient and casual inquiries began to pick up Bap's trail, which was a devious one and led eventually to the most unlikely of all resorts, the austere precincts of the forbidding lodge housing the headquarters of the Blacktailed Deer, most distinguished of Mandan secret societies, to which only the oldest and most influential men belonged.

"He must have got into real trouble," said Matt.

"One way to find out," said Joe. "That's to go in and see."

At the entrance to the lodge two warriors of the Soldiers' Secret Society, official policemen of Mandan customs and rituals, barred their way with the wands bound with otter skin and owl's feathers that were their emblems of office. Joe began to mutter with dissatisfaction and to slide his hand gently along the barrel of his rifle, but Matt laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Bap," he called into the dark doorway behind the soldiers, "we've come to get you!"

Bap's voice rose clearly in cheerful reply. "Then why do you stand out there in the night?"

Next they could hear him explaining in his bastard down-river dialect that the callers were particular friends of his. Voices of Mandan authority replied to Bap and then called out. The two soldiers stepped aside. Matt and Joe entered.

Here in the high-domed chamber hung with shields and masks, the heads and horns of animals, the garlanded scalps of their enemies, were gathered the elder statesmen of the five towns, including every member of the council Matt had addressed in the afternoon. The savage senators lounged in ease against backrests and on couches of bear-skins and buffalo robes, their wants attended to by the women servants of the society. In the place of honor nearest the fire squatted Bap, complacently fingering the two little decorated bone tablets of the guessing game as he gambled with Kakoakis himself for his most prized single possession, the circlet of grizzly-bear claws that was the distinguishing badge worn on the headdress of a Blacktailed Deer.

Matt spoke rapidly in English, which he was certain no Indian present understood. "Whatever it is you are playing for, be sure you lose it quickly. Then watch for the first excuse to leave—if they will let us leave. We must get back to the island."

Bap merely grinned and shook his head. He was in a mood even more irresponsible than when he had risked everything they owned at billiards. "But I do not want to lose. With one more counter I will win his bear claws. Sit down. Eat. In the pot there is a fine stew of buffalo calf pounded with huckleberries."

Matt, aware of how closely he was being watched by forty pairs of eyes, took the greatest care that his anger should not color his expression or his tone. "This is no time to fool. Joe and I came across the river alone to find you. The boats are starting west the minute it gets

light, whether the Indians agree or not—even if it means a fight."

Bap seemed not to hear. He remained for a moment entirely absorbed in the next move in his game. He extended his closed fists for Kakoakis' inspection. Kakoakis indicated Bap's right hand. Bap slowly opened the hand to disclose the unmarked tablet. Again the Indian had lost. Kakoakis handed over the next to the last of his stick counters, took the slivers of bone, and prepared to make his last effort to deceive his opponent. Only then did Bap glance up over his shoulder at Matt.

"Take off that look of the bear with the sore head. These are our friends. Sit down. Eat. There is plenty."

Matt looked around at the lounging councilors. Their faces remained inscrutably impassive, but every glittering eye was fixed upon him. He made another great effort to keep the tone of his voice disarmingly amiable.

"There's only one way to find out the kind of friends they are. Get over here with us and see what they do when we start to back out."

Bap's attention was again on his game. Kakoakis extended his closed fists. "This game she is too easy," said Bap. "The Indian he have play her all his life—and always he do what you expect." He selected the hand. It opened to disclose the marked tablet. Kakoakis laughed to prove in this important company that he was a good loser, and without hesitation passed over the bear-claw circlet. Bap stuffed it casually in his pouch, slapped the grim Kakoakis companionably on the back, and rose.

"Now maybe you believe. When we are ready to go up the river we can go—and the Indians they will kiss us. It has been so since you talk to them in the council today. When you talk to them they listen like the Pawnee, which is like the bird listen to the snake. But when you go with Manuel Lisa back to the island the Mandan they think you are angry and that maybe never we be friends. Only

when Bap come alone to play with them do they start to think maybe it is better to wait and see."

Matt began to realize that the councilors were watching him as he had been watching them, anxiously awaiting the first sign of his temper, that they feared even to make a friendly gesture lest the overture be misinterpreted or rebuffed.

"Looks like the big speech of your'n took 'em in, for a fact," murmured Joe.

Bap laughed. "Always you have think Bap he is the fool. Always you are right. But for the fool there is sometimes also the need. Now let us go tell Manuel Lisa to come here to eat with us. Maybe if my friend Kakoakis—and some more of our friends who are here—go with us to invite him he will believe."

Bap repeated the suggestion in sign language to his hosts. Kakoakis leaped to his feet, now eager to be foremost among those to prove their friendship for the white traders. All pressed forward beaming, laughing, shaking hands with Matt and Joe, proclaiming their unshakable affection for the white men and their desire to see them return year after year.

When the delegation reached Manuel Lisa on his island he opened a keg of trade whisky, and the process of pressing the invitation lasted most of the night. Matt was the center of attention. He had brought about the understanding. Even Manuel Lisa ungrudgingly gave him his full due.

Yet for Matt a cloud lay over the occasion. Since the moment in the lodge of the Blacktailed Deer when his success had been made apparent, his mood had remained disturbed, restless, dissatisfied, and when at length he had gained the solitude of his blanket the cloud swooped down out of the clear starlit sky to envelop him in folds of depression he could not shake off.

His imagination overpowered his ability to control his thoughts and filled his mind with images so dark and un-

welcome that the day began to seem not one of victory but one of defeat. He was unable to dwell upon the speech before the council, the excitement on the crowded beach, the search for Bap, the invasion of the secret-society lodge, the acclaim of his fellows, the open gate to the westward. He saw only the pale figures flashing past him in the street, remembered only that demonstration that all human beings, even the most simple, were perpetually preoccupied with the impulses and demands of sex. And nothing could prevent this conception from becoming involved with thoughts of Nora. He was certain his feeling toward her could have no conceivable relationship to this mere animal excitement. But his yearning for her was sufficiently akin to that primitive desire to become identified with it. It was something all men felt. Nora was more desirable than other women. Therefore men would feel it more strongly for her. Every perceptive man who saw her must want her, as Bap had at first sight, and as he himself had without at first fully realizing it. There were those three officers he had left so complacently in her company. There must have been many suitors since. Tonight, at this very moment, men surely were seeking her favor.

Conclusion followed unhappy conclusion. Presently she was bound to make her choice. It was completely irrational to imagine she would wait for him. He had made her no declaration, gained from her no promise. Very nearly a year had passed since he had seen her. By now she might already be betrothed, perhaps married, possessed by another man. This bitter logic threw him into a sweating panic that grew as he became increasingly aware of his utter helplessness to do anything about it.

Finally, his imagination summoned up for him the ultimate torment. The form of Nora seemed to take shape beside him in the darkness. She was bending over him, her long hair hanging down on either side of her face to brush his sleeve, as on that morning in the Shawnee cabin. This image of Nora was a kind of combination of all his

most treasured visual recollections of her. There was the rounded, ivory loveliness of her bared breasts, as when he had first seen her in the storm. There was on her face the fleeting expression of breath-taking beauty, as when they had stood together under the candlebird tree. There was in her eyes the glow of warm, attentive kindness, as when they had sat together in the fireplace. But of the very delight in his vision was born a horror that choked him. He could not feel that it was his sleeve her hair was brushing, that it was over him she was bending. It could not be, for he had heedlessly withdrawn from her to this immense distance. It could only be some other man whose fortune was to be nearer her, some formless and faceless wooer unknown to him upon whom her attention dwelt.

The picture once outlined by his fevered imaginings persisted like some unbearable nightmare from which by no effort of his will could he awaken. He threw off the blanket and strode down to the beach, stumbling over sleepers who cursed him drowsily, brushing past the camp cooks, who were already kindling the breakfast fires. At the island's margin he knelt to splash water from the river over his head and face. The chill cleared away the worst of his disordered fancies and restored some of his capacity to think, but in thinking he found no comfort. By the most rational examination his situation retained the quality of nightmare. There was no denying he had withdrawn to this immense distance from her and was about to continue to a far greater distance where he was to remain separated from her for months and possibly years. There was no denying that meanwhile other men were privileged to be at her side. His clear thinking, as usual, brought decision.

Matt shook Bap firmly until he grunted and opened his eyes. "Are you awake?" Matt demanded. "I want to be sure you're listening."

Bap stretched and yawned. "I am listening."

"I've been thinking," said Matt.

Bat sat up. "That is always bad."

"Bad or not, listen. When I talked to the council yesterday I was only trying to scare them. But I've been thinking since that what I said was actually the most sensible way of looking at things. According to Lewis and Clark, when you follow the Missouri beyond here you run straight west four or five hundred miles before you get to the mountains. We already know that the Pawnee are about that same distance almost straight south of here. This is what I'm getting at: A man could save hundreds of miles and maybe two months if he took horses and struck out from the Pawnee straight across country for the forks of the Missouri. You might run into some trouble with the Crow and the Cheyenne, but you couldn't have more than you get on the river from the Sioux and the Aricara. Now this is my idea: We'll let Joe go on with Manuel Lisa to handle our trade goods and look after our business wherever they set up their fort. We'll go back south, collect what the Pawnee owe us, and in the spring take horses and a pack train across the plains. As I said, we'll be months nearer by that route and in the long run we'll save time and money. What do you think of the idea?"

Bap clapped a hand on Matt's shoulder. "I think it is a fine idea. If that Nora she was waiting for me I would start back when St. Charles she was only one mile behind."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

NORA rose very early each morning in order to renew before other members of the family could distract her the unfailing pleasure she took in the inspection of her domain. The route she followed, the sequence of impressions she sought, were always the same.

Coming down the stairs her hand slipped along the rail, her fingers sensitive to the slightest ridges left by Matt's drawknife in smoothing it. She crossed immediately to open the front door, pausing to note the strength with



which he had built it, and stepped out on the flagstones he had laid, to look at the view and to note the weather, recalling, as always, that it was just here they had stood in the sun and wind that summer day he had agreed to build her house. She saw there had been the first sharp frost of the season the night before but that even so early in the morning a gentle south wind was bringing with it little currents of Indian-summer warmth.

Re-entering the house, she allowed herself next a view of her own special pride, the contents of the storeroom. He had provided the housing for it, but it had been her own industry and diligence that had made it a storehouse. Here were bars of maple sugar, clusters of wild-grape raisins, jars of wild honey, crocks of wild strawberries, raspberries, huckleberries, and currants, baskets of walnuts, hazelnuts, pecans, and pawpaws.

"Nora, you're a cross between an ant, a bee, and a squirrel," Austin had said. But she was unmoved by his teasing. She took a special satisfaction in the gathering of the abundant wild produce of forest and marsh, for to her it represented a fine increase over and above the expected production of the farm, cultivated fruit and grain, foals, calves, and pigs. With the coming of cold weather there would be the time for butchering and to this store would be added rows of hams and bacons, kegs of salt pork and corned beef. Already the bins in the cellar below

were overflowing with potatoes, pumpkins, squashes, and snips. Her family now enjoyed not only the security she had sought but a plenty for which she had never dared hope.

She emerged from the back door to look with familiar delight at the flow of artesian water from the stone curbing the well, to glance in at the milk, cream, cheese, and butter in the springhouse, and then slowly to lift her gaze to the rows of young apple, peach, pear, and cherry trees and beyond to the sturdy new growth of the hedge Matt had planted. She walked down past the smokehouse and the corncrib, pausing to watch the Negroes feeding the pigs

and the cows and again at the barn door to sniff the aroma of hay in the loft, and finally came to a stop at the rail fence to look at the nine mares in the nearer meadow that were her selection of Matt's share of the stock. This was to her the finest sight of all, because they were his and because the mares she had picked had each borne him a good foal.

She knew he must be far away. She had not seen him for nearly a year. Her heart sank sickeningly whenever she recalled how she had missed seeing him the day of his departure. Yet they did not seem to her truly separated. His presence was still manifest everywhere around her. And his fearful winter's labor in bringing the stock from Kentucky had convinced her. His devotion might be of a kind strange to her understanding, of a nature alien to her own, but it did exist. She no longer felt anxiety lest he fail one day to return to her. Meanwhile she could bring herself to wait with patience and while waiting even to know a certain brooding expectant happiness like that during the winter he had built her house.

Luther and Frank ran whooping from the house in search of her. Long before they reached her side they were yelling: "Nora, there's been a frost! Didn't you see the frost. Nora? Can't we go get a bee tree today, Nora?" They drew up breathless beside her. "Can't we, Nora? Can't we go hunt honey today?"

Nora looked smilingly down at them, though not so far down at Frank any more after the way he had shot up this last year so that his thin eager face was now nearly at her shoulder. "It wasn't such a hard frost. The bees may not be so very sound asleep. You won't like it if you get stung."

"Who's afraid of a little sting?"

Luther's persistence was more direct. "Can I go tell Neb to hitch up the wagon? Can I, Nora?"

She nodded. Luther ran for the barn. Frank was content to permit Luther to run such minor errands unsupervised. "You know what the Indians call bees, Nora?"

Nora was familiar with her part in these dialogues. "I've never heard. What do they call them?"

"White man's flies."

Frank was waiting for her surprise and she did not disappoint him. "But all the bees around here are wild. Why do they call them that?"

"Because there weren't any honeybees before the whites came. All the wild ones are tame bees that got away sometime. The Indians say they can always tell about the spreading of the white settlements because always a hundred miles ahead the bees show up in the woods."

"That's very interesting. Where'd you hear that?"

"Matt told me. That day Luther fell in the water."

Nora laughed. "When I think of all you remember he told you that day! He must have done a lot of talking."

"Not so much. But you'd find out if you paid attention that whatever he does say is worth listening to."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Nora agreed.

The Negroes threw themselves with as much gusto as Luther and Frank into these expeditions to collect the fruits of the wild, delighted by the relief from more routine duties and entranced by their native interest in food. They were most excited by the making of maple sugar, which they called "short sweetenin'," and the gathering of wild honey, which they called "long sweetenin'," but they took more unalloyed pleasure in the honey hunt on account of the milder season. When a great hollow sycamore, falling, burst to discharge gushes of golden honey, they ran to scoop up the shattered comb in their hands, dropped to their knees to guzzle like animals, screamed with laughter when a crawling, somnolent bee contrived to sting one of their fellows, and managed before the cargo was complete to get horses, wagon, and themselves equally smeared and dripping.

When the last tub was overflowing with honey and the wagon was trundling homeward, Nora lingered behind, glad to be alone for the moment. A bluejay and a squirrel

took turns lazily scolding her, a rabbit loping along about his business paused to wrinkle his nose at her suspiciously, a great blue heron settled to a perch above and divided his time between preening his plumage and staring at her. For all the chatter and the rustling and the whisper of wind and the dwindling clamor accompanying the wagon, the forest seemed hushed, as if nature were listening. It was against such a wild background as this she could imagine Matt moving. Among these great trees she seemed closer to him even than behind the walls of the house he had built.

From the wagon ahead rose sudden cries of excitement. Frank and Luther appeared around the bend in the cart path running toward her, yelling madly. It sounded as if they were calling, "Nora—Matt's here! Nora—Matt's here!" but this was clearly impossible. Yet around the same bend he did appear, coming toward her. For those first few seconds she remained strangely unmoved, her emotions too strong for outlet.

Frank and Luther reached her side, too out of breath to say more. She saw now that Bap was trotting beside Matt. When they came to a stop before her both men stared silently, as if their sole purpose in coming so far was to look at her.

Frank, getting his breath, was the first to break the silence. "What happened, Matt? Couldn't you get up the river?"

Matt continued to stare at Nora. But Bap looked around at Frank with a bewildered start and a sheepish smile, like that of a sleepwalker suddenly awakening, and broke into voluble, excited speech.

"Did we get up the river? We get up more far than Pierre Chouteau or Pryor with his soldiers or any other man this year except Manuel Lisa and he get past the Mandan only because Matt he fix it for him. First Matt he come to the Pawnee where the Pawnee have Joe and me on the woodpile. When Matt talk to them he make the Pawnee so afraid they give us horses so that we will go far away.

We ride for many days across the country that is flat and where there are no trees and where when you look away there is nothing to see but the buffalo and the sky. We come to the dark mountains where the storms are born. We come to the Aricara, where Joe shoot the Sioux chief.

"We come to the Mandan. When Matt talk to the Mandan they listen like the Pawnee and they let Manuel Lisa go on. But then Matt he have done everything and he have nothing more to do. When Matt he have nothing to do he think very soon of something to do. He think we will come quick back to St. Louis. So we come. It is more easy to come with the river than to push against the river. So we come down very fast. The moon she is bright so we come by night the same as by day. We come so fast that our hearts sing. We sing, too. We look at the river and the moon and we laugh and cry out very loud. Never have people come down the river so fast. From the Mandan we are here in fifteen days. A man who does not come to what he wants like the bird flies he is the fool." Bap looked soberly at Nora. "Matt he is not the fool."

Nora did not meet his glance. Neither she nor Matt seemed to have heard anything Bap had said. But Frank had been terribly excited by the account. He began tugging at Matt's sleeve.

"Matt, can I go to the Indian country with you next time? Can I, Matt? Next year I'll be going on thirteen."

Luther was not to be left out. "If you take him will you take me too, Matt? Will you, Matt?"

Bap rose to the occasion. "You know what we bring you from the Mandan?"

This captured the boys' attention. "What?"

"A Minataree headdress of grizzly-bear claws."

"Really?"

"Only the big chief can wear one."

"Let's see it," demanded Luther practically.

Bap began fumbling with his pouch and moving away

along the cart path after the wagon. "Come with me and I show you." The boys followed him eagerly.

"Is that really why you came back?" Nora asked Matt.

"Yes," said Matt. There was so much more he had planned to say. But all he could say at first was to repeat "Yes." She waited. Suddenly his tongue was loosed. "I came because when I am away nothing is important except seeing you again. I came because when I am away I fall into a blind panic thinking about the other men who can be nearer you than I can."

"That need be small worry to you," Nora said.

He seemed hardly to have heard. All he had felt during that wild dash downriver began to find expression in halting broken phrases. "I don't want to ask you anything. I have no right yet. I only want to tell you. I want you to know. I want you to know what I'm working for. I want you to have everything. The year after next—maybe sooner—I'll begin to have what I want you to have. Then I'll be back. But I can't ask you to wait. That wouldn't be right. Too much might happen. You deserve so much. I don't want you to miss anything—anything. I only want you to know what I'm thinking—and what I'm doing."

"Matt," she asked, "isn't there anything you want now?"

Slowly, almost reluctantly, he drew her into his arms.

Hand in hand, they strolled homeward. From the distance came the singing of the Negroes with the wagon, their voices warm and gay, the words indistinguishable yet haunting. From time to time Matt looked at Nora, smiling contentedly beside him. It still seemed to him incredible that this altogether desirable woman could regard him with so much favor. Yet he was already so sure of his happiness that he could take fanciful liberties with it. He would take three steps before he looked at her again. He would take ten before he kissed her once more. This fascinating game seemed to appeal equally to Nora.

Nature herself seemed to him disposed to provide a fitting background for this perfect hour. The sky shimmered with

the pleasant soothing haze of Indian summer. The sunlight broke through the treetops in long, dusty, warming shafts to illuminate the tapestried scarlet, copper, and gold of the autumn leaves. The forest presented with lavish evidence the fruitfulness of its wild harvest. Every breeze brought a shower of ripened walnuts, pecans, or hazelnuts clattering down through the twigs and branches. Yellowing pawpaws and persimmons hung like myriads of Oriental lanterns. Huge grapevines crowned the tallest treetops with tremendous clusters of their purple fruit. The aroma of honey dripped from the wagon along the way made the very air rich with promise.

## CHAPTER XXIX

LYDIA waited until the family scattered after breakfast. She bundled up Mark and placed him in his pen before the front door. She fed Linda and put her back in her cradle. Then she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and hurried to the storeroom.

Nora was bent over a barrel carefully arranging layers of freshly cut beef. She looked up. "It's cold in here after the warm kitchen."

Lydia drew the shawl from her shoulders up over her head. "This is a thick shawl." She waited. But Nora began strewing a layer of salt over the last layer of meat. "The way you're mooning over that corned beef," said Lydia, "you'd think you were laying away a barrel of silk and rubies."

Nora weighed a square of beef in her hand. "With seven in the family to feed—not to speak of four Negroes—come winter we'll get more good out of a barrel of corned beef."

"Nora, hasn't it ever struck you there's more to life than eating and working?"

"Well, there can't be so very much more—unless eating and working come first."

"What possesses you to be always so practical about everything? I tell you it's positively unwomanly. And unnatural besides. No man can really like a practical woman."

Nora smiled. "One seems to, though."

"That's because so far he's only looked at you. And you can't blame him for that. The way you look is something to stop a man's thinking for quite a spell."

Nora paused to pour salt thoughtfully from one hand to another. "I wonder. I suppose everything must have a reason. Though I'd thought things like—like the way he feels, and I feel—that they just happened."

"You should have some idea by now. The two of you must have talked the whole night."

"We did," admitted Nora. "We've been apart so much we do seem to find a lot to talk about."

Lydia waited. But Nora began placing another layer of beef.

"Well," said Lydia, "I suppose the time was bound to come when you'd start having secrets to keep from me."

"There's nothing to keep from you—nothing that you haven't been told already." Nora straightened and looked at Lydia. "And you're hardly the one to talk about keeping secrets." Her glance became accusing. "It's true, isn't it?"

Lydia nodded, not at all contrite. "I didn't want to tell you before I had to. I knew how you'd take on."

"Well, I should think so," said Nora. "Why, it's been such a little while since you had Linda. Honestly, I could shoot that Daniel Austin."

"You talk as if it were entirely his doing."

"Well, isn't it? I should hope you had more sense. You know you're not nearly as strong as you should be."

The familiar faraway look came into Lydia's eyes, as always when she was considering any problem involving the behavior of men. "Before much longer, Nora, you'll find out there's more to getting along with a man than giving him something to eat and keeping his house clean."

"Lydia!"



"And with all his little faults, Dan is about the best company that way of all the men I've known—since your father. No, I wouldn't want him shot."

"Lydia, you're a completely abandoned woman."

Nora began placing another layer of meat. Lydia shivered.

"I didn't come out here into this freezing cold just to talk about my problems. I came to talk about yours."

"Have I a problem?"

"Any girl in love has."

"What is mine?"

"Keeping him."

Nora shook her head. "That's his problem."

Lydia ceased beating about the bush. "He left this morning before any of the rest of us were up. Did he go to St. Charles?"

"No, to St. Louis. He has to see William Clark to tell him about what happened in the Mandan town. And he has some other business. He'll be back in three or four days."

"When he comes back from St. Louis, is he going to bring that new Baptist preacher? I do think it nicer to be married by a minister than just by a justice of the peace, don't you? Now don't tell me you haven't got it all settled just how you want to get married."

"We've never even mentioned it," Nora said.

Lydia shook her head. "And after talking all night, too. At least you've been thinking about it."

"Honestly, Lydia, I've been too excited to think."

"Well, now's the time to start thinking."

Nora began wiping her hands on her apron. She stared into the distance. "Naturally, I've thought about it—over and over. I'd taken it for granted we'd be married maybe next spring. He's got to go back to the Pawnee this winter to straighten out his business there."

"No—no—no. Marry him now—before he goes away *anywhere* again."

"Why?"

"A man forgets so easily. Even a paragon like yours. You want him to come back. Give him something real about you to think about—and to make him want to come back to you every time he thinks about it."

"You mean a man's not likely to stay faithful to you, to want to come back to you, until after you've slept with him?"

"The occasion's a little nicer than you make it sound."

Nora considered the matter for a moment, then shook her head with resolution. "No. For two reasons. I don't want to think of marriage as a kind of scheme to hold either of us to the other." She shook her head again.

"You said two reasons."

"The other is that I already miss him too much. I couldn't stand anything that made me miss him more."

With one hand Lydia dabbed at her eyes with the fringe of her shawl and with the other shook Nora affectionately. "I suppose it's always foolish to imagine you can tell anyone else anything really important. There're some things you just can't tell. Anyway, it's a relief to know you own to some feeling. That'll make it harder for you to learn—but you'll learn faster, too."

Matt reappeared the morning of the third day, returning for once sooner than Nora had expected him. With Frank and Luther, she was at the rail fence looking at his mares and foals. He came striding around the corner of the barn and was upon them before they realized it. Without the slightest hesitation he embraced Nora and after kissing her continued to hold her enfolded in his arms while with a possessive smile he studied her flushed face. This spectacle shocked the two boys immeasurably and they withdrew in embarrassed dismay.

His arms tightened about her. She clung to him and gave herself to his kisses. The already familiar glow of mutual passion magnetized their embrace, drawing their bodies ever closer together. He rubbed his face caressingly against her hair. Then she could tell he had lifted his head to look

into the meadow behind her. Even in the warmth of his arms she shivered. He seemed to be looking over her shoulder, not to the meadow only, but to the distant Platte, and to the far mountains beyond. He was straining not only against her but also away from her. She returned his kisses desperately, but the chill of fear crept along her veins, a fear as much for herself as for him.

She could feel the change within herself as perceptibly as she had detected the momentary change in him. She felt that he belonged to her now. She was becoming the woman in possession, ready to expect and to demand, to correct and to criticize. Before he had come back to her she had been made happy by the most vague anticipations. But she knew now that Lydia was right, that from now on she would be discontented. She would feel deprived of what it had become her right to have, she would be continually fearful for his safety; as time went on she would be increasingly angered by his absence. She turned in his arms without withdrawing from his embrace until, with her back to him, she too could look into the meadow.

"Those were fine horses you picked for me," he said. "I was telling Sam Chalfont in St. Louis about them."

She sprang away. "Matt, you haven't sold them!"

"Yes. At the price he offered I had to. I knew how you'd feel, but there's another way to look at it. I've doubled the reason now to move fast. For every hundred dollars I take out with me I can expect to bring back a pack of beaver worth five hundred. I don't like to put everything in terms of money. But I don't know any other way to measure some of the things we have to have."

She had already forgotten the horses. At the moment only one thing seemed to possess real meaning for her.

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!"

He nodded. "I'm going to set up a post at the Pawnee so we can collect some of what they owe us. Hipolite will run

it for us. So many of his wife's cousins have moved in on him that he's ready to go back to the Indians. So I have to be sure to get up to the Platte before the river freezes. And I've already lost so much time coming down here from the Mandan."

"Wasted so much time, you mean, don't you?" she demanded, hating herself for the injustice as much as she was hating him for the pain he was causing her.

"I don't want to waste anything—not one minute of anything," he replied soberly. "But let's face the facts. Sometimes the simplest, truest things are the hardest to find words for. To begin with—I love you. I want to marry you."

"Do you find that so very hard to say?"

"No. I could sing it—by the hour—in any company."

"It's easy for me to say, too. See—I love you. I can't help it." But she did not move toward him.

He drew a long deep breath. "This was what I was coming to. You've a wonderful family, Nora. I can understand why you feel the way you do about them. I feel almost the same way myself. But this is also what I meant by a simple thing being hard to find words for. I can't very well move in and be just one of them."

"I wouldn't want you to."

"So what we have to have is a place pretty much like yours—not too far away—where Lydia and Frank and Luther and the rest of them can come and go as often as they feel like, which can be as much a home to them as the one you have now, but which will still be our home—yours and mine. You're not listening."

"Yes, I am. I was only thinking how exactly that is what I want."

"We both want that. That brings us back to measuring things in terms of money. We have to have it. I've got to make it—and get right at the job." There was a ring of genuine excitement in his last words.

Nora grasped at the fence rails behind her to support her while she said what she must say. "I believe that is what

you think, Matt. But I believe you feel something deeper and truer than that. You feel freer now than you did before, freer to go—as far as you want—and it is because you have made sure now that I will be waiting for you to come back to me.”

He confronted the accusation without wavering. “We must both be as honest as we know how to be. I must go. And it is true that while I am away there is nothing I will count on so much as the hope that you will be waiting for me.”

Nora closed her eyes and struggled to think. At length she looked at him again and spoke. “I will try to be as honest with you as I can. To wait means that I am waiting to marry you. That makes waiting a part—almost—of being married. And this is what marriage means to me. It means really living together, even when apart, because even then you always think first of the one you’re married to. It means the other always comes first—not only before anyone else, but before anything else. On those terms, I will wait for you.”

“And on those terms I will work for us.”

“Oh, Matt!” cried Nora. “Matt!”

Gently he drew her into his arms to comfort her. “I do love you, Nora. You must never forget that. Never—never—never.” But even while his lips were murmuring against her ear she could tell when again his glance had lifted to the western distance beyond her.

## CHAPTER XXX

THE sunny warmth of the March morning was shadowed by a chill haze as the day wore on and by evening the rising northwest wind was wintry. Matt had been tantalized for weeks with the false promise of an early spring. This was the third time a wave of mild air had spread slowly northward over the plains, melting the snow, softening the

ground, loosening the ice in the river, and now again a belated winter storm was looming.

He had long since completed every preparation for the extraordinary moves he proposed to make before another winter. By months of persistent hard bargaining he had extracted from the Pawnee the larger portion of what they owed him. As a result he had hardly touched the new stock of trade goods he had brought upriver the previous autumn. The proceeds of these patient transactions had been invested in furs to be sold in St. Louis this spring and in a train of horses and mules for the later overland journey westward. The furs had been cleaned, sorted, and wrapped ready for his dash southward by river. The mules had been selected and broken to pack ready for his hurried return to the Pawnee for the ultimate dash westward by land. The Shining Mountains were at last within the certain reach of a single season's travel. He had checked and charted his every move and plan to make this so. There remained nothing for him to do but to fume and to wait upon the weather.

He was all too aware of the need to make an early start if he was to get down to St. Louis, spend some days with Nora, and yet return to the Pawnee in time to set out again by midsummer for the mountains. But he dared not start until full spring relieved him of the threat of ice in the Missouri, which by slowing his progress would leave him more subject to attack by raiding Sioux or thieving Kansas. Each day he was delayed, however, reduced by one more day the number he could spend with Nora, and he had learned during the lonely days and nights of the long Pawnee winter to value fully the prospect of her company.

Matt climbed the roof of the trading post to make one more survey of the weather before darkness fell. The western horizon was a dull, dark red barred by level streaks of black cloud. The wind, though not yet strong, was growing colder by the minute. It would snow, he decided, before morning. From the margin of Wolf River below rose a flock of sandhill cranes, flying in their customary wild

circles, uttering their harsh, loud, dissonant cries, the weirdly gyrating flock rising higher and higher until the individual birds were lost to sight above, the faint distant discordance still trailing across the gray sky, inexpressibly lonely and mournful.

In the Pawnee town on the flat at the foot of the slope smoke from the evening cooking fires was flickering from the vents in the beehive-shaped mud houses, squaws were scurrying in with loads of wood, herdboys were bringing in the favorite war horses and buffalo horses of the warriors to be tethered among the houses at night. The Pawnee, confused no less than the migrating swans and geese by the changeable weather, had returned earlier than usual from their winter buffalo hunt.

He dropped to the ground, took another look at the darkening west, and entered the trading post. Hipolite was in nominal command of the post and Matt had done everything he could to emphasize Hipolite's authority in the eyes of the Pawnee in order to strengthen his position when the time came to leave him to conduct the business alone. But in the more intimate councils of the post Hipolite's authority had been grievously undermined by the temporary residence of the two partners.

Matt had vetoed Hipolite's inclination to live according to natural traders' custom in an Indian mud house after the Indian manner; he had insisted upon the laborious construction of a substantial log edifice that incorporated the functions of trading store, fort, and white man's dwelling, complete with counters, shelves, bins, cupboards, gun racks, tables, chairs, and a fireplace. Next Hipolite had been obliged to assume the responsibility of three Pawnee wives—though he groaned at the expense—by Bap's insistence on a household cleanliness that required more sweeping, scrubbing, and washing than could possibly be extracted from one or two Indian women.

Hipolite's sense of outrage had been relieved only when Matt took the gamble of sending to the Omaha to offer

Little Owl employment at the trading post. Father and son regarded each other warily at first, but Little Owl was well aware of the advantages of this position among the white traders, and Hipolite, with some surprise, presently began to become aware of the responsibilities of parenthood. To-night it was this recently discovered son who was causing him discomfiture. Hipolite was fretting and clucking like an old hen whose offspring was taking to water.

Conversations in the household were carried on in a bewildering mixture of languages and dialects. Hipolite spoke to his wives in Pawnee, to Little Owl in Omaha, and to Matt and Bap in French, while Little Owl always addressed the partners in English, which he was rapidly learning. Little Owl, now nearly fourteen, had come to the conclusion that he had become a man, possessing as he did a pistol, a rifle, a mackinaw blanket coat, and nine horses, these latter as a result of his recognized and honorable talent for stealing from the enemy. Since he had attained the economic and social stature of a man, he had decided the time had come to take a wife. Having given the matter due consideration, he had made his selection.

"Her father will give her to me for six horses," said Little Owl.

Hipolite's opposition was violent. "At your age? What could a boy like you do with a wife?"

Little Owl lost none of his aplomb. "There are many girls among the Omaha who could tell you."

Hipolite began to realize the seriousness of the crisis and with the acumen of a trader turned to compromise. "So? It is true a boy must have his fun. Why then do you not play with the Pawnee girls and save your horses?"

"Not my horses," said Little Owl. "It is for you, my father, to give the six horses for the wife of your son."

The thrifty Hipolite choked. To part with the price of six horses was sufficient cause for alarm. But though he could not have brought himself to admit it, even more alarming



was the prospective interference with his own association with his son.

The argument roused Bap from his doze. "Who is she?" he asked with the interest of the connoisseur.

"Shedea, the daughter of Wereca," said Little Owl.

"Ah, hah," said Bap, "that pretty one! Wereca watches her more close than his three-buffalo horse. You will not play with her until you have paid for her."

"Who should know so well as you," growled Hipolite, "the number among the Pawnee who are yet maidens?" He turned again upon Little Owl, without much hope but unwilling to admit defeat. "You have the sharp eyes. You know the way through the cornfields. You have always the handful of beads. The girls they watch for you. What use have you for a wife?"

Little Owl remained firm. "To make my moccasins. To build my fire. To tan my hides. To lead my horse. A man has many uses for a wife."

"No," roared Hipolite, "I will not do it."

Little Owl dropped the argument. Wrapping himself in a buffalo robe, he went out, as was his custom at intervals every night, to visit the corral where the horses and mules belonging to the post were penned during the hours of darkness. Since his own nine head were among these, he wished to make sure that the Indian hired to guard the corral was awake and alert. When he returned, Matt saw by the flecks of white on the robe that the snow was already beginning to fall.

Little Owl said no more until the evening meal was ended. Then, as was also one of his customs, he brought a coal to light the pipes of Matt and Bap. To show he bore no grudge he also lighted Hipolite's. Hipolite sighed. He grasped Little Owl's wrist and drew him down to a seat on the bench beside him.

"That Shedea—she is still young," he said. "She will keep. Maybe next spring we will talk to her father, eh?"

Little Owl took shameless advantage of Hipolite's af-

fection. "No," he announced. "I will give six of my own horses for her now. Then I will go to live in her father's house."

The injustice of the pressure being put upon him stirred Hipolite's native obstinacy. "I will not do it," he whispered. "Still I will not do it."

Bap's interest in amatory affairs, even in those of others, moved him to intervene. "This is not the time to cry. Little Owl wants only to laugh. It is the duty of his father and also of his friends to make him able to laugh. So I will give one horse. And Matt will give one horse."

Matt only nodded. He was finding less humor in the situation than Bap. The romantic aspirations of this thirteen-year-old boy cast irrelevant and yet disturbing reflections upon the importance of his own emotional state.

Bap continued: "You are his father, Hipolite. You will give three horses. It is three times more important to you that your son is able to laugh. And Little Owl will give one of his own horses to show he is in earnest. So?"

Hipolite relaxed, relieved by this escape from the dilemma. Little Owl leaped to his feet, quick to clinch the bargain. "Then we are agreed," he said, looking to each in turn. "Bap will give one horse. Matt will give one horse. You, my father, will give three horses." All affirmed the agreement. "And I will give one horse—unless Wereca will give her to me for five."

Toward morning Little Owl went out again to assure himself of the safety of the stock in the corral. It was snowing steadily and the white blanket was already several inches deep on the ground. He groped his way toward the corral, where he found the horse guard seated in the lee of the fence, asleep. Little Owl crept up and kicked him hard in the face to awaken him.

The horse guard may once have fallen asleep. But he was never to awaken. When Little Owl looked more closely he saw how the snow had mercifully filled the gaping tomahawk slash across the back of the young warrior's neck. He ran

around to the gate of the corral. The bars were down. The pen was empty. The snow had covered all tracks. The stolen herd might have been taken in any direction.

Little Owl's reaction was instinctive and immediate. He ran to the house of the town crier, yanked him from his slumbers, thrust his drum upon him, and pushed him out the door. The general alarm aroused the entire town instantly. Before the first thumps of the drum had ceased to echo Little Owl was back at the post explaining what had happened to Matt, Bap, and Hipolite.

On hastily borrowed horses they joined the armed strength of the Pawnee milling about in darkness and galloping out blindly over the snowy hills. The breaking of day cleared the confusion and revealed that the general horse herds of the Pawnee had been unmolested. Only the selected and very valuable animals penned in the traders' corral had been stolen. The snow on the ground made tracking as impossible as if the missing horses and mules had taken wings. The first excitement died down and more and more warriors, after assuring the traders of their deepest sympathy, turned back toward the warmth of their homes.

"They are not too sorry," said Hipolite. "The Pawnee think that now we will have to buy more from them."

Bap was for striking straight across the snow-covered hills for the Kansas town, the nearest source from which enemy raiders could have sprung. But Matt shook his head. He swung his horse around and joined the homeward procession. The other three exchanged puzzled glances and followed.

Once at the post, Matt sent for Characteris. While they waited he paced back and forth, scowling thoughtfully.

"It's no use talking about buying more horses and mules to take the place of those we've lost," he said. "It would take more time to break them to pack than we can afford to waste. So—we've got to get them back."

"We will never get them back from the Kansas by walking up and down here," said Bap.

"The Kansas didn't take them," said Matt. "Whoever stole them knew exactly where the corral was, they could find it in the night and the snow. Only someone who had visited here as a friend could have known that."

"The Pawnee themselves could have stolen them," said Hipolite, nodding morosely. "The Pawnee are our friends, but like white people they will steal from their friends."

Matt shook his head. "The horse guard was a Pawnee. They would not have tomahawked one of their own. No, it was friendly Oto or Omaha who came here to visit and had time to look around and to plan what they would do."

For once Bap was without his usual confidence in Matt's perspicacity. "They would not dare. The Pawnee visit the Oto town and the Omaha town all the time. We know the traders there. Our horses would be seen. They would have no place to keep them."

Matt swung on Little Owl. "Think, Little Owl. Think that you are an Omaha here to visit. You see the horses and mules in the corral. You would like to have them. What would you think about it?"

Little Owl was pleased by this appeal to his special talent. "I would think it very easy. Because the animals were broken to lead I could catch them and take them away without making any noise."

"But when you lead you must go slowly. You cannot just stampede them and run. And you would be tracked and caught."

"It was snowing."

"But you planned to do this the day before or maybe the day before that. You did not know it would snow."

Little Owl frowned and gave further consideration to the problem. "I would lead them to the river and into the shallow water. I would not start downstream because that is the way you would think first to chase me. I would go upstream until it began to grow light and then I would tie the horses out of sight in the woods on the nearest island. When it was dark again I would lead them into the water and go

farther upstream. The third night I would pick a good big island and there I would stay with them for a month. Then when you and the Pawnee had forgotten to look for me I would take the horses to the Osage to sell."

Matt put his hand on Little Owl's shoulder and gave him an affectionate shake. "I am glad," he said. "That is the only way they could have been taken and that is the one place they can be hidden now. And since you have told us that this is the way you too think it was done, we can believe you had no knowledge or part in it."

Little Owl was neither offended by the revelation of Matt's former suspicion nor pleased by the clearing of his reputation. "You can see I did not take them, for I stand here before you," he said. "And I would never let anyone take them for me because then he would have the horses and I would not. I am not foolish."

Bap gave a shout of laughter and struck his fist against his forehead. "Even now I sometime forget," he cried. "When Matt thinks he goes to the answer straight and true like the arrow. Did you hear, Hipolite? Remember that when you see that Matt he is thinking there is need for us only to sit down and wait."

Characteris scratched at the door. "We are going to the Kansas to recover our horses," Matt told him. "When we will go we will close this door. While we are away no Pawnee will open it."

"It will be so," Characteris agreed.

The four horsemen rode in the direction of the Kansas town, swung in a wide circle, and moved straight westward, parallel to the Platte but well out of sight of the river bottom.

"Maybe," said Little Owl after the third hour, "when they see it still snows to cover their tracks they see there is no use to hide. Maybe they start straight off south for the Osage."

"No," decided Matt. "They know that at this time of year it does not snow for long. They would know that if it

stopped snowing when they were out on the open plains they would start leaving a trail we could see for miles."

"You are very smart, Little Owl," chided Bap. "When you grow up you learn that when you have think quick then is the time to think more."

Shortly after noon the snowfall ceased.

"Until now they've been able to push right ahead on land," Matt pointed out. "But from now on they'll have to wade in the river to cover their tracks and that will slow them up. If they took the horses as early as midnight that would give them a good seven hours' start. But from now on we can gain on them. Tomorrow they'll not dare to travel by daylight. If our horses can stand it, by tomorrow night we can be sure we're higher up the river than they are. Then we can start combing the islands downstream."

Matt's plan of campaign was simple but almost unendurably laborious. The lower Platte was upwards of a mile wide but in few places as much as a foot deep. The sprawling sandy river bed was so thickly dotted with small wooded islands that seldom was either riverbank visible from the other. It would be necessary to examine every island large enough to provide a hiding place for the missing herd.

Having reached a point upriver certainly above any hiding place the thieves could have attained, the pursuers shot several buffalo and used the hides in the construction of two very lightdraft skin canoes. Hipolite and Little Owl, each with two horses, proceeded downriver on either bank by land, keeping the maneuvers of the canoes in sight and watching for tracks on the chance that the thieves might have risked abandoning their hiding place among the islands to strike out across the open plains. Meanwhile Matt and Bap, each with a canoe, undertook the more arduous task of inspecting the islands as the search progressed downstream. The river was so shallow that they had to wade more often than to paddle and yet so swift that they were always in danger of being swept past islands it was their purpose to search. Quicksands, mud flats, and rafts of driftwood

impeded their efforts. The number of islands was far beyond Matt's anticipation. No matter how hard they struggled they found their progress limited each day to two or three miles of the river's winding course.

Spring came in earnest and with it an unbroken succession of warm sunny days. This favorable weather only added to the agony. These were days Matt could have been on the Missouri sweeping down to St. Charles. The second week these were days he could have been spending with Nora at Riverhill. The third week these were days he should have been preparing to start northward and westward on the first lap of his drive toward the far mountains. Each night he persisted until full darkness made further search valueless. Each morning he was out with the first streaks of dawn.

There came a morning when Matt stood beside his canoe at the river's edge cramming cold pemmican into his mouth and waiting for the first glint of light to appear on the water. Suddenly there came to his ears music more thrilling than a choir of angels. From a long shadowy island in mid-channel there echoed the unmistakable, prolonged, plaintive wail of a dissatisfied mule.

Matt aroused the others. They recharged their rifles and embarked in the two canoes. The river, for once co-operative, offered them a channel in which a rippling current bore their eggshell-light craft directly down upon the island. Here at a signal from Matt they waited in a thicket of cat-tails for sufficient light by which to make their attack.

They crouched, eying one another, listening, fingering their weapons. The still morning air was heavy with the acrid smell of horse dung, an aroma that was sweet in Matt's nostrils. Bap grinned with excitement but also occasionally crossed himself, for in extreme emergency he was reminded uneasily of his religion. Rivulets of sweat ran down Hippolyte's face. He had devoted a lifetime to avoiding hazards of this nature, but with the eyes of Little Owl upon him he was more afraid to yield to his fear than he was of what might

await him beyond the cattails. The light grew stronger. Finally Matt nodded.

They rose from the bushes, worked their way through the fringe of brush girdling the shore of the island, and burst out into the relatively open forested interior. All around them were hobbled horses and mules tethered to trees from which they had gnawed all the bark within their reach. The four men, bent nearly double, their rifles ready, ran forward among the nervously snorting animals, straining for the first glimpse of their enemies. Little Owl counted the horses and mules as he ran.

"All are here," he shouted with satisfaction. "Every one."

The assault fell on empty air. They came out on the farther shore of the island, wheeled, and began a more intensive search. Still they found no one. The ashes of yesterday's cooking fire were warm. There were indications that the thieves had numbered no more than two. But evidently for some reason they had taken alarm, and certainly they had fled. Their identity remained a mystery.

"When you live among Indians," observed Hipolite, "things that are foolish can always happen."

The horses and mules were gaunt and half-starved. The thieves, after having acted at first with so much shrewd audacity, appeared to have lost heart while waiting here in hiding until they had lacked even the spirit to venture to neighboring islands to bring rushes and cottonwood bark to feed the herd. It took most of the day to get the weakened animals across to the north bank where there was new grass to restore their strength.

"It'll be three or four days before they'll be able to travel," said Matt. "After all the time we've lost I want to save every minute from now on. Bap, you'd better take Hipolite's horse—he's the fastest of our four Pawnee horses—and ride down to the landing below the Oto town. Buy us a barge if you can find a good one. If not, have that half-breed boat-builder make us one. With any luck you can have everything



ready to start by the time we can get to the Missouri with the pack train."

Matt allowed the horses and mules to graze most of each day but kept them moving slowly toward the Pawnee town. By the time he arrived there the animals were fit for light use. The next day he set out with the pack train for the mouth of the Platte.

The slow pace of the train, however, gave him much time to think. He was not, after all, on his way forward. He was turning back. Three times he had been turned back by circumstances beyond his control, for returning to beg Nora to wait for him had been as much beyond his control as Tallee's club or the theft of his goods. But now he was turning back of his own volition. Hipolite could deliver the furs in St. Louis or they could be held at the Pawnee town for later sale when he needed the proceeds. His sole purpose in going downriver this year was to see Nora. When he had planned the early spring dash, during the winter, this had seemed a wonderfully attractive purpose. He still wanted to see her—more than ever, more each day he was away from her. But it was no longer early spring. Two months of summer travel time were already lost. To give up two months more was to narrow the time left to reach the mountains this year to the danger point. He began to tell himself that in yielding to his desire to visit Nora he was yielding to weakness, and in his experience he had had to pay dearly for each moment of weakness.

The forenoon of the day he was due to sight the Missouri he glanced ahead impatiently to see Bap on a distant hilltop riding very hard westward toward the pack train. Suspecting some unexpected development, Matt lifted his horse to a gallop. For a time Bap was lost to view in a dip between the hills. When Matt mounted the rise and again saw him he was surprised to see Bap had pulled his horse to a stop and was sitting motionless in the saddle, his head bowed. On becoming aware of the hoofbeats of Matt's horse he looked up

quickly, straightened, and trotted forward. As he approached, Matt saw that Bap was deeply troubled.

"What's the matter?" Matt asked. "You all right?"

"Me—I am fine," said Bap.

"How about the boat?"

"Everything is ready."

Matt looked at him sharply. "Well, what is it?" There had been enough ill luck recently. He was in no mood to welcome the report of more. "Speak up—what's wrong? If you've brought bad news, let's hear it. If not, what does ail you?"

"I do not like bad news. I do not like to tell bad news."

"Whether you like it or not won't improve it. What's happened?"

"I saw my cousin, Martin Alain, at the mouth of the Platte. He is on his way to trade with the Omaha. He is not long from St. Charles."

Matt seized Bap's arm and jerked him half out of the saddle. "Has anything happened to Nora?"

"Nora is well. But all is not well with her. Her mother have the new baby. It is a fine strong boy." Bap's voice broke. "But the mother was not so strong. Nora's mother is dead, Matt."

The two men rode on in silence. Presently Matt began to dwell less upon what he had escaped and more upon what Nora had suffered.

"There was nothing she counted on more," he said. "Nothing could hurt her more than to have Lydia taken away from her."

"Only one thing," said Bap, pulling up his horse.

"What could that be?"

"To know that she could not count on you."

"That'll never happen to her."

"She have the very big need for you now," Bap said. "Never will she have more need for you."

Matt looked away quickly from Bap's eyes. He had tried to forget that Bap had always loved Nora. Bap had helped

him to forget. Since his dramatic renunciation on the water front at St. Charles Bap had never once referred directly to his feeling for Nora. But it must have continued, become stronger than ever.

They rode on. Matt began to realize how much the prospective nature of his reunion with Nora had been altered. No longer was it to be the joyous meeting of lovers. The most it could offer was a measure of consolation. His normal masculinity was dispirited by the need of dealing with grief. He faced the practical considerations involved. All his planned movements of the summer and fall must be abandoned. He could not now dash in upon Nora, enjoy a few days of her company, and rush away again. She had a right to expect more of him than that.

Coming out on the last hill overlooking the Missouri, Matt drew up in astonishment at sight of a keelboat drawn up on the strand, surrounded by a considerable camp of white men.

"Who's that?"

Bap answered without interest. "Manuel Lisa. I have forget to tell you. He come down the river the day before yesterday."

"Manuel Lisa!" exclaimed Matt. "How far'd they get? And what about Joe?"

"Joe he is fine." Bap drew a long breath and rattled off his report in a monotone. "They say everything march very good. When they leave the Mandan they go up the Missouri to the river they call the Yellowstone and they go up the Yellowstone to the river they call the Bighorn and there they build a fort. That is the country of the Crow. It is a good beaver country and the Crow are glad to see them. They trap and trade. Joe he have two Crow wives and he live with the Crow in their tents. Everybody but Manuel Lisa stay in the Crow country for another year. Manual Lisa bring out with him only the *engagés* to handle the boat. He bring a good load of beaver. There are two packs belonging to us."

The Yellowstone. The Bighorn. The tents of the Crow.

The great mountains just beyond. The images took sharp and vivid shape in Matt's imagination. There was the country toward which he had set out, toward which he had struggled for so long. He was to have attained it this summer. Now, instead, he was turning back. He was giving it up to meet other demands that might hold him for a lifetime. It was a surrender. The taste of defeat was bitter in his mouth. The compulsion to go on was like the instinct to breathe. To retreat to Nora now was to relinquish an essential part of what made him the kind of a man he was. If he went back he would never again be that same man.

"If Manuel Lisa got in the day before yesterday, what's he waiting around here for?" he asked.

"He is waiting for you. He must see you. He is making the big fur company. He calls it the Missouri Fur Company. Pierre Chouteau and William Clark and William Morrison and Andrew Henry and Pierre Menard and many other big men will belong. The company will take over all the trade of the Missouri. Manuel Lisa wants you to join. He says of all men the company has the most need of you."

"No, thanks," said Matt. "I'm already mixed up enough."

Bap seemed not to have heard Matt's reply. He seemed, in fact, to be giving equally little heed to what he himself was saying. "Manuel Lisa thinks you are the best man with the Indians. It is for that he wants you so much. The Blackfeet they are very bad. Unless the traders stay friends with the Crow they cannot stay in that country at the foot of the mountains where there are many beaver. Manuel Lisa wants you to go to the Crow now—today. I tell Manuel Lisa that no matter what, first you must go down the river. But Manuel Lisa say that that will be too late. Already the Blackfeet make war with our people. Unless the company can make sure to hold the Crow then there is no use to have the company. Everything else depend on this one thing.

"Manuel Lisa say we do not understand how it is with the Crow. You cannot with them settle everything with one big council meeting like with the Pawnee and the Mandan. The

Crow do not live in towns like the Indians on the Missouri. They live in the skin tents which they take with them when they move and they move like the wind—now here—now there. Sometimes you will ride for days in order to find one camp of the Crow. If you are to talk to the Crow for the company, then you must not lose one more day. I tell Manuel Lisa no matter what, you must first go down the river. He say no matter what, he will stay until he have talk to you."

The two rode on, Matt considering anew the demands that awaited him at Riverhill. There could be more than one way to look at these demands. Having lost Lydia, Nora would the sooner need the new home he had promised her. Only if he were now on his way to the mountains, instead of turning from them, might there be some hope of this within another year.

"The fur trade's filled with risks, Bap," said Matt after a time. "When you've one small outfit any piece of bad luck can set you back—an upset canoe can cost you a season. There's one thing about a company. There's safety in it. It equalizes the risks. With the kind of future I'm planning I'm interested in what I can surely count on. Manuel Lisa must have talked to Joe already about joining the company. How do you feel about it?"

Bap swung around in his saddle to stare at Matt in sudden comprehension. "How—at a time like this—can you think about the company?"

"What do you think I am thinking about?" cried Matt. "Do you think I am thinking about anything but her—that I wouldn't give anything to spend a day with her right now? But a day isn't worth the loss of another whole year. I'm not working for the chance just to visit her. I'm working for the chance to stay with her and take care of her."

Bap shook his head. "You think too much. You think of Nora. You think of the company. But you think most of the mountains. Come then, let us start for them now—so that you can come back the more soon."

## CHAPTER XXXI

MATT'S letter to Nora traveled down the river in Manuel Lisa's pocket. It traveled fast, for Manuel Lisa moved with the speed of an energetic man who had important affairs on his mind. But upon his arrival the letter stayed in his pocket while he was absorbed in conferences leading to the formal organization of the Missouri Fur Company.

Austin learned in St. Charles of Manuel Lisa's hurried passing and followed him to St. Louis. Coming from upriver, the trader might have some news of Matt, and if there was such news Austin was anxious to be the bearer rather than to have it burst upon Nora without warning. When he returned to Riverhill it was late at night but there was still the glow of candlelight in the kitchen window and he could hear the thump of Nora's spinning wheel.

Nora had learned that the terrible void left in her life by Lydia's death could be made in any sense bearable only by devoting every waking moment to work. These past two months she had led a kind of frozen existence, almost without thought and seemingly without feeling, the vital processes within her suspended as they are in a plant in winter. With frantic wariness she postponed the moment when she must face and accept the stark significance of Lydia's death. She dared not face it alone. Day by day she waited for Matt's return.

The moment Austin entered she rose slowly and took a faltering step toward him, her anxious gaze seeking to gain some premonitory hint from his expression.

"You've news of Matt."

Austin ran to her and seized her hands, which were outstretched as if she were feeling her way into darkness.

"I have—and very good news," he said. "Matt's business is very much on the rise, Nora. Manuel Lisa is organizing a fur company that most of the most important men in the

territory are joining. And Matt's right in the middle of it—second only to Manuel Lisa, as a matter of fact."

Nora's gaze was still searching Austin's face as if it were from his looks rather than his words she sought to learn what she must know.

"But where is he now?"

"He's safe and well. Manuel Lisa saw him on the Platte not above a week ago. He waited there to meet him. He considered it absolutely essential to persuade Matt to join the company. That's pretty good for a man as young as Matt."

Nora withdrew her hands and stepped backward. She seemed scarcely to breathe. "He's not coming back at all this year?"

Austin's tone became even more resolutely cheerful. "He was on his way when he met Manuel Lisa. But nobody's so good at dealing with Indians as Matt. Manuel Lisa made him realize it was necessary to begin at once on negotiations with the Crow. That's a nation away out by the mountains."

"He said he would come back at least every year," Nora murmured. "But this is the first year, and he didn't come—this of all times——"

"Now wait, Nora," protested Austin. "You must be fair. You can hardly hold that against him. How could he have known about Lydia?"

Nora looked at him again. She had shown no more direct reaction to his words than if she had heard nothing he had said since he entered the room. "He must have written me."

Austin reached into his pocket. "What am I thinking of? Of course he did! Here it is!"

Nora sank to the stool beside the spinning wheel, nervously tore open the letter and began reading.

"Dearest Nora:

"I was already on my way, trusting to see you within a matter of days, when circumstances arose which make it impossible for me to come down the river this year. There remains too little time even to write a proper letter fully

expressing my feelings at this moment. I know how much Lydia meant to you."

Tears blinded her and Nora could read no farther. "He did know!" she gasped. "And still he didn't come."

For the first time since Lydia's death she gave way to weeping. She rose and groped toward the stairs. Austin overtook her and drew her into his arms. In this moment of utter loneliness she welcomed the comfort of his support and continued to weep against his shoulder. He murmured soothing phrases of encouragement, gently stroked her bowed head. His touch was light and caressing, his sympathy not pressed upon her but merely offered. After a time he slipped a finger under her chin and, as if she were a child, lifted her head until he could look down into her tear-stained face.

"Look at me," he begged. She opened her eyes and ceased sobbing for a second. "You have nothing to be afraid of, Nora. Cry all you please. But you mustn't be afraid."

Tenderly he pressed her face back against his shoulder and resumed the slow sympathetic stroking of her hair. In the midst of her grief the thought came to Nora that it was this tenderness and sympathy, this capacity to express warmth and affection and understanding intimately, that must have accounted for Lydia's love for him. She shivered and withdrew from his arms, drying her eyes on her apron while she regained her self-control.

"I am afraid, Daniel," she acknowledged. "But it's not Matt that I'm afraid of—or for. I'm not afraid to wait for him another year, or as many years as he wants me to wait. It's that his not coming back—now when I expected him—has made me realize what was true all along. It's made me realize how Lydia's being gone—how completely that has changed everything."

Austin nodded. "I don't suppose anybody has ever been missed like Lydia has been. By all of us. But I can see that is



not what you mean. What is the great change of which you are so afraid?"

"We're both thinking about it," said Nora, "so I suppose we might as well talk about it."

"Whatever it is, let's bring it right out in the open."

Nora drew a long breath. "Lydia was the tie that held us all together. She was our only reason for living in the same house—for considering ourselves all one family. Without her, what are we?"

Austin smiled. "I'll answer that in a moment. But first, what has Matt's coming back or not coming back—just what has that got to do with it?"

"Maybe," she admitted, "maybe it hasn't so much to do with it as I've been thinking. Even when he's with me he's always thinking about going again. I'm not blaming him. I'm only being honest. Everybody's got a right to decide what they want and to go on wanting it. And I know how he feels about me. If he saw I needed him he'd stay with me. But he'd keep right on wanting to go. He loves me—but he loves his mountains more."

"While you love your family more."

"With me it all fits together. I don't have to choose."

"Suppose, just for example, marrying him meant you had to go away with him—alone. Would you go?"

"He couldn't ask me to make a choice like that."

"Quite so. And that's my answer too, Nora. You don't have to choose—now or ever. All you have to do is stay here and wait. Everything's the same. We have lost Lydia and that has made a great change in our happiness. But it need make no change in the way we live, Nora."

"But, Daniel, this is your home. Forgive me for mentioning it—this house is built on your land, Riverhill is your property. You have your own life to look forward to. Nobody could expect you to go on indefinitely being overrun by Lydia's children."

"Are you forgetting by any chance that three of them are also mine?"

Nora bit her lip. "Of course I haven't forgotten. But the other three of us have fathers you've never even seen. It's really too much to expect of you."

Austin kept smiling, amiably and knowingly, as if every step in the discussion had been a step he had foreseen and it was being taken exactly in the direction he had anticipated. "Now, Nora, you do me an injustice. Have I then seemed so cold and heartless these last two months?"

"Why indeed, Daniel, you have not," gasped Nora. "You've been wonderful. Why, you haven't even taken a—" She broke off in confusion.

Austin laughed. "I've not even taken a drink. Surely that's one small phase of being a model parent, isn't it?"

"But it's been so much more than that. You've been kind and considerate and helpful. You've played with the babies, and stayed home all the time, and gone hunting and fishing with Frank and Luther, and taken an interest in everything."

"Sounds like the exemplary behavior of a man while courting or on his honeymoon," said Austin. Then he ceased to laugh and caught up her two hands again. "You said the things we're thinking about we might as well talk about. So let's face the fact, Nora. The fact is you have nothing to dread. You want the family. It's yours. You want Matt. He's yours—at least to wait for. Even if he never returns, you have only his loss to dread. For all this"—his gesture included the walls of the house around them, the fields without, the children asleep above—"this place—Lydia's children around you—all this you can still have and hold."

"You're really so good and kind, Daniel," said Nora. "I don't wonder Lydia was so attached to you. And I do appreciate all you say. You have been a great comfort to me tonight. But I can't stop feeling the way I feel. Lydia used to say I was too practical for my own good. I can't help feeling it's all so sort of temporary and unfulfilled—like waiting for Matt. It's something you can go along with from day to day, but that's all it is."

Austin pressed her hands, which he was still holding.

"That brings me to the ultimate answer to your fears. I had not planned to mention it now, but since we are talking we may as well talk it through to the end. You are the natural head of this household. If in the time to come you ever feel the need of becoming that in name as well as in fact—then that too can be yours." He smiled gently at Nora's gasp of consternation. "Yes, Nora, that is what I mean. The eventual answer to all our problems—yours and the children's and mine, and a very happy one, at that—might be for you to become my wife."

Nora tore her hands away. "But, Daniel, how utterly and absolutely impossible!"

"From your expression one might think you'd been accosted by a Kickapoo Indian."

"No." Nora shuddered. "Only by Lydia's husband."

"Well, Nora, it's hardly incest, you know, so there's no need to act revolted. As a matter of fact, Lydia would approve."

"I couldn't bear it," whispered Nora. "I can't even bear the thought of it."

"Then let's forget I even mentioned it. After all, you've not received a proposal, but only the intimation that one awaits you in the however distant future—and only then if you feel disposed to hear it. Now it's late, my dear. And you're overwrought. Try to get some rest."

Nora glanced back unwillingly from the top of the stairs. Austin had gone to the cupboard and taken down a tumbler and a bottle of whisky. He was pouring the tumbler half-full. On second thought he filled it up.

She was reminded of the variety of ways in which he had been accustomed to bring pressure to bear upon Lydia. Always amiable and affectionate, he had never quarreled with her. But when his wishes were opposed he was given to a ready yielding and afterward to scolding the children, to staying away from home, to drinking more heavily, and once even to having that brief affair with Madeleine Primeau. With the tenacity of the weak he persisted in these wayward

and apparently irrelevant devices until it was always Lydia who actually yielded.

She realized now that his suggestion of marriage was more than a sympathetic offer. He had made up his mind he wanted to marry her. He was resourceful and almost remorseless in gaining what he wanted from others. With the children as hostages she was at an enormous disadvantage. When she looked forward to the long year that must elapse before Matt's earliest possible return, she was afraid.

## CHAPTER XXXII

ONE of the horses snorted. Matt, instantly awake, sat up in his blankets to listen. He heard nothing more except the gurgling splash of the little waterfall and the faintest murmur of wind in the pines. The night was impenetrably black. The overcast had settled down into the canyon until the sky was as dark as the earth beneath. The very mountains rising on all sides had withdrawn into the pervading darkness.

He stared into that darkness, suddenly oppressed by a sense of unreality. For years his face had been turned toward the mountains that had seemed to await his coming beyond the horizon. He had struggled toward them, returning to the endeavor after every successive repulse. Now he was among the mountains. These past few weeks he had become as familiar with their defiles and lakes and forests and rocky fastnesses as formerly he had been familiar with the expanse of the plains and the sweep of the river.

But still the true mountains eluded him, just as at the moment the very granite slope on which he was camped remained invisible to him in the darkness. For these were not the true mountains. These were but the outriders, the outlying lesser chains that sprawled for hundreds of miles across the threshold of the greater mountains beyond. The true mountains, the backbone of the continent, reared in a

mighty rampart yet another week's journey westward and he had so far gained but an occasional distant glimpse of their snowy peaks. The true mountains were still to be sought and seemed perpetually to retreat before him as does the mirage before the advance of the desert traveler. Even the name seemed to have escaped him. The words "Shining Mountains" were no more heard. Men referred to the western mountains, the greater and the lesser alike, simply and prosaically, as the Rockies.

One of the horses snorted again. The sound recalled him to the practical demands of the moment, demands that kept him sleepless tonight and that since he had entered the Crow country as the representative of the company had denied him the privilege of making a closer approach to those far snowy peaks even after at last they had been brought within his view. The time and the risk required were luxuries he could not afford this year. In his situation at this moment he could not even afford the loss of one horse. He was engaged in proving to the dubious and observant Crow that beaver-trapping was a feasible and safe occupation, and the most minor mischance might injure his case.

To attract a profitable supply of furs to the company's trading post on the Bighorn required general participation by the Crow. But the Crow were unaccustomed to trapping and all too aware of the special dangers involved. The Crow country was frequently invaded by small parties of Blackfeet who lurked in hiding, sometimes for weeks at a time, on the watch for the opportunity to steal a horse or take the scalp of an unwary straggler. Similar small parties of ambitious young Crow ventured with a like purpose into the Blackfoot country to the northwest. The Crow were a proud and warlike people who scorned to admit fear of the Blackfeet while engaged in their normal activities, such as buffalo-hunting, which kept them together in considerable and defensible groups. Beaver-trapping, however, by its very nature required separation and isolation. Much as they craved

trade goods, they hesitated to subject themselves to this unfamiliar risk. To persuade them to trap had become Matt's responsibility. He had left the post with a very small party of white trappers to demonstrate to the Crow his theory that in this vast wilderness the hazard of any one discreet camp's being discovered by prowling Blackfeet was slight.

The horse snorted for the third time. Little Owl was on duty watching the horses and there could be no more alert horse guard. Still, now that he was awake, Matt decided to investigate. He stood up. Since there was no possibility of locating by sight his position in relation to other objects in and around camp, he did so by listening and smelling. Bap's regular breathing came from three paces to the right. Fifty feet away he could hear the deep snore of Drouillard and beyond, the gentle wheeze of Joe Thorn. They slept thus separated so that in event of an emergency all four could not be subjected to the same danger. From across the stream Matt could detect the faint odor of damp ashes mixed with the wet sand with which the cooking fire had been extinguished. In the pine tree behind him he could smell the hanging haunch of a mule deer Joe had killed yesterday.

Having thus orientated himself, Matt began moving silently upstream toward the little meadow where the horses were hobbled. Before making each step he felt cautiously with one moccasined toe to make certain that when he eased his weight forward he would snap no stick, rustle no leaf. As he approached the horses he could tell that they were nervous. He hissed to inform Little Owl of his presence. He was startled when Little Owl's whispered response came out of the darkness at his very elbow.

"Yes, Matt."

Matt considered himself a skilled and experienced woodsman but he was forced to admit the young Indian's senses were yet more acute. Without doubt Little Owl had detected his approach long before.

"What do you think's the matter with the horses?" asked Matt.

"Something moves on the mountain," whispered Little Owl.

Matt listened but could hear nothing. "Where's Shede'a?"

Little Owl gave the low coo of a dove. A moment later, though he heard no sound, Matt could smell the sweetgrass with which she scented her hair and knew that she was beside them. Matt had added Little Owl to the overland party so that when he knew more of his plans and movements the boy might be sent back to Hipolite with a message to Nora. The morning they started Shede'a had appeared riding her proper distance in the rear of her young husband, ready for any task, as befitted the wife of a warrior. Quiet, demure, shy, she never raised her downcast eyes except when he spoke to her, and yet there was no part of Little Owl's life in which she was not able and eager to share fully.

"What did you hear?" asked Little Owl.

"I heard a scratch—as of something sharp against the rock," she whispered.

All listened.

"It's too dark for Blackfeet to be crawling around," suggested Matt.

"No, it is not a man," said Little Owl quietly.

Matt recalled the Indian belief in many types of supernatural monsters. The two young people were brave, for they had more to fear than white men know. All listened again. A dislodged pebble rolled and bounced for a second on the mountainside. In volume the sound was hardly more than that of a dropped pin. But in the silence it provided the sensation of a rolling cannon ball.

"Keep the horses quiet," said Matt. "I'll go wake the others."

Matt stole with cautious haste back toward camp. As he neared the little waterfall there was a change in the sound of the gently splashing water, as if a log had been thrust across the current. Then he caught the smell of wet hair and began to suspect the identity of the invader. He waited a second to make sure. Then he heard the snapping of the rawhide

thong by which the venison was suspended, a satisfied grunt, and immediately thereafter a crunching and rending as the bones and meat were torn by powerful teeth.

"Bap! Joe! Drouillard!" Matt called out. "Be quiet, lie still—listen, but don't move. There's a grizzly in camp!"

The great "white" bear of the mountains had no fear of man. Instead, when he encountered his human enemy he invariably attacked. This was no time for one of the sleepers to start up heedlessly.

"It's darker'n the devil's pocket," said Joe in a conversational tone. "I can't see nothing. But it sure sounds like you're right."

With the sound of voices the grizzly began to growl while he continued to shake and tear at the venison.

"Be quiet," whispered Matt. "Don't move or do anything to attract his attention. I'm on my feet and off to one side. I'll try to get him to come for me."

"What will you do with him when you get him to come?" asked Bap.

The beast snarled viciously. By the sound he was still worrying the meat, but he was dragging it toward Bap's position. Suddenly there came an angry exclamation from Bap and immediately thereafter the grizzly emitted a terrifying roar. There was the sound of a struggle, of hoarse panting, of another roar, and finally of the rending of blankets.

Matt started to rush forward but fell over a boulder and into the lower branches of a cedar tree. He extricated himself and snatched up his rifle again.

"Call out, Bap," he yelled, "so I can guess where you are. I'm going to shoot."

After the beast's next roar Bap's reply came out of the air above.

"I am up in the aspen tree."

The ripping and tearing sounds continued. The enraged destruction of Bap's blankets was still in progress.

"Now is the time for everybody to find a tree," counseled



Bap. "The bear he is very mad. When he sit on me to eat his venison I stick the knife into him."

The animal was ranging more widely now, in his fury whirling and striking at whatever he encountered in camp. There was a mingled buffeting and splitting as a pack saddle was torn to shreds. A bundle of beaver traps wired together came flying against the boulder beside Matt's ear. Then there came a new scratching sound, not for the moment to be identified.

"Oh-ho!" sang out Bap. "He is very strong. The aspen tree she bend."

The bear had ceased to roar now and instead was grunting with satisfied effort. Bap's tree cracked sharply.

"If you're still on the far side of him, Matt," said Joe, "get yourself down flat on the ground. Drouillard and me are goin' to try a couple of shots."

"Wait!" yelled Matt. A grizzly was only to be killed by the most precisely placed bullet. In this darkness they might shoot a hundred times without achieving anything more than to add to his anger. That would be too late to save Bap. They had to see to shoot. "Wait!" he yelled again.

He dumped out half his horn of powder into the dry needles at the base of the cedar tree, lowered his rifle until the lock was alongside, and pulled the trigger. The flash from the pan ignited the heap of powder. The blaze burst upward in an explosive sheet of flame. In a second the whole tree was on fire, casting a blinding radiance over the area around the camp.

The grizzly was disclosed standing upright, straining to pull down the aspen, his great distended chest exposed to the point-blank aim of two of the surest marksmen in the world. Joe and Drouillard fired. The bear released his clutch on the bent tree, which flew upward so violently that Bap was very nearly thrown from his perch. The grizzly roared once more, clawed fiercely at his wounded chest, and began to waddle belligerently toward his two assailants. Weakening, he dropped to all fours, but still dragged himself in the

direction of his enemies. Matt, his gun by now reloaded, stepped alongside, and placing the muzzle of his rifle against the head, fired the final shot.

Bap dropped to the ground and ran to embrace Matt. "Always you think quick." He glanced from the bent aspen to the burning cedar and drew a long, relieved breath. "But this time not too quick."

Drouillard and Joe ran to retrieve camp property endangered by the fire. A dozen freshly cleaned and dressed beaver skins had been left to dry in the lower branches of the cedar. These were already ruined. Of more concern to Matt was his pack sack, which the bear had contrived to knock against the very trunk of the tree. In the intense heat the rescuers could get at it only by prodding with long sticks. The smoking leather burst, permitting the contents to spill out. Matt's notebook in which he kept his records and accounts and which contained his entire supply of paper blazed up like tow. Though he scorched his face and blistered his hands, Matt dashed in to snatch it from the fire. But the curling pages were burned and all the entries unrecognizable.

Little Owl and Shedeia appeared with the horses. Bap, Joe, and Drouillard began hastily packing the party's few effects. There was no need to wait for orders from their leader to realize that they must move at once. The burning cedar was a beacon to stir the curiosity of any Blackfoot within a radius of thirty miles.

In the beaver pond above, all six waded and groped in the darkness until they had recovered their traps. Then, with Little Owl and Shedeia leading the way on foot and the horses following single file, the expedition set out to the eastward for the nearest pass and the other side of the range.

Matt slumped in the saddle while his horse picked his stumbling way among the boulders of the stream bed. He was conscious of the smart of his burns, but far more conscious of the smell of burned paper rising from the charred fragments of the notebook in his game pouch. The accounts

and records he could remember and replace whenever in the future the need for them arose. His great loss was the destruction of the many pages of the letter he had written to Nora that was destined for dispatch southward and eastward this autumn with Little Owl.

Since he had written her the brief note at the mouth of the Platte and had turned his back on the prospect of seeing her this year, the need of recapturing some sense of being in touch with her had become an increasing obsession. With each mile he had traveled away from her he had seemed to be adding more than mere distance to his separation from her. The slow months of summer and autumn in passing had seemed to bring no nearer the spring when he might hope to return to her. At least, he had discovered, there was some relief to be gained in telling her in detail and at length of his thoughts and feelings. It was this letter of many pages that had served momentarily to bring him this comfort that had been burned.

Dawn found them in the pass. The biting wind and the frost on the ground were reminders of how far the season was already advanced. If Little Owl were to avoid the risk of being overtaken by winter on the open plains, he must leave at once. Examining the burned notebook, Matt found in the center one portion of unblackened paper the size of the third of a handkerchief on which to write.

Little Owl and Shedeá were not threatened by serious dangers on their homeward journey across the plains. Little Owl was far too wary to be surprised by common hazards. Once, because of the sudden lifting of a dust storm they were sighted by a band of Arapaho buffalo-hunters. The strenuous Arapaho pursuit was pressed long after it was proved both foolish and vain, for the fugitives' carefully selected horses were incomparably faster. Later they were beset by an early winter blizzard, but this they weathered comfortably by killing two buffalo and wrapping themselves in the fresh hides. They arrived at Wolf River in safety, bringing

with them as an addition to Little Owl's herd three wild horses he had contrived to rope in passing.

Before the end of the winter Hipolite had ascertained that Martin Alain at the Omaha town was likely to be the first of the traders resident in the region to leave for St. Charles in the spring, and the letter was sent to him for delivery. Such was the celerity of this rude wilderness post that Nora received the letter within six months of the morning Matt with cold stiffened fingers had written it in the pass.

The late April afternoon was sultry with the hint of a thunderstorm brooding in the west. On account of the fine yield the year before Nora had decided to put in twice as much corn this spring. But Neb's periodic sciatica had returned at an awkward time and the task of plowing had fallen to Nora and Frank. Breaking the sod of previously uncultivated prairie land was the hardest kind of work, but Nora did not mind. She relished pitting her strength against the jerking plow handles, the feel of the softened earth beneath her feet, the sense of achievement, the hungry and sleepy weariness that came with the end of the day.

But even had she found the labor oppressive she would have tolerated it cheerfully, for she recognized it as one more of the trials imposed on her by Austin in the course of his devious, persistent campaign to weaken her resistance. She was engaged in a duel. She did not propose to be the first to flinch.

Reaching the point where Frank's next furrow would cross hers, she pulled in her team to rest and waited for Frank. The gulls following the plow to pounce upon worms and grubs exposed in the overturned earth rose to circle and scold. Nora glanced back with satisfaction at the third of the field already plowed. The furrows, three feet apart and crossing at right angles, had marked the area like a neat checkerboard. At the intersections the corn would be planted. She could imagine the corn-to-be, luxuriant, sturdy, green, yielding this year a good sixty or seventy bushels to the acre. Her dress clung damply to her. She could feel the

perspiration trickling down between her breasts and along her thighs. It was an agreeable sensation, making her part of the rich moist earth in which her bare feet were planted, giving her a renewed sense of fertility and vigor. She was preparing for a new growth, giving of herself to create new life.

Frank pulled in his team, mopped his face on his sleeve, and grinned. He was thin but wiry and tough and seemed as tireless when working as when hunting or fishing.

"If Dan only had to do some of this plowing maybe he wouldn't have been so quick to sell our three field hands last winter."

"He'd be here helping us plow," said Nora, "if business wasn't keeping him in St. Louis."

"He's been there for two months. The way his business generally goes, when he does show up here again he'll want to sell something else."

"Now be fair," urged Nora. "Remember he gave us our choice."

"Sure. He let us pick whether we wanted to sell off part of the stock, mortgage the place, or let the field hands go."

"Well, he didn't have any choice. It was a debt of honor he had to pay."

"Yeah—that's what he said. He said he lost it gambling. But I've been thinking while I've been plowing. You know, Nora, he never used to play cards, even when he was drinking. I wonder if that was really what he wanted the money for?"

Nora had wondered, too. She was quite certain some new device, more irritating than any that had gone before, was in the making. To her relief Frank's further speculation was interrupted by Luther, who had noticed the pause in their labors and came dashing across the field brandishing water bucket and gourd dipper. He doubled the duties of water boy with those of nursemaid. Nora glanced beyond him to the edge of the field where four-year-old Linda had

fallen asleep in a patch of buttercups and five-year-old Mark, his extraordinary propensity to roam hampered by a small log tied to one ankle, was busily uncovering a mole run. Their behavior was not cause for concern. One-year-old Danny, however, was crawling along a furrow and from time to time putting something into his mouth.

"What's Danny doing?" Nora asked Luther.

"Looking for white grubs."

"He's not eating them?"

Luther nodded, amused. "He likes them."

"But they'll make him sick."

"I don't see why. Look at the gulls. Bugs don't hurt them."

"You run this minute and put Danny back on the grass," commanded Nora. "And keep him there."

She turned to pick up the reins and noticed Frank looking off. "Somebody's coming up to the house," he said.

Nora's heart began to pound. These were days when any unexpected arrival was exciting. She had told herself again and again that she could not possibly expect Matt for another month. But there had been times before when he had appeared without warning. More likely it was Austin. She hoped not. She preferred him sulking in St. Louis. Then she caught a glimpse through the young trees of the orchard of a leather hunting shirt. Maybe it was Matt. A second glimpse killed the sudden hope. This was a short man.

"It's Martin Alain," said Frank. "He must have just got home from the Omaha. Chances are he's got news of Matt. No other reason for him to come over here."

Nora leaned against the plow handles. Her damp dress seemed suddenly chill. Martin was almost trotting toward them, but he might have been receding rather than advancing so long did it seem to her he was taking to approach with the message that she had as yet no way of knowing she might better dread than welcome. Then she saw his face. No man, she assured herself, could come beaming

with bad news. Nevertheless her throat ached and her eyes smarted.

"Got you a letter," Martin announced. He drew from his belt a piece of folded leather and held it out to her, handling the packet gingerly with that awe for the written word of one who cannot read.

The leather was stitched with deer sinew and Nora's trembling fingers found difficulty with the knot. Frank whipped out his knife and cut the stitching. She drew from the rude case the folded scrap of paper and, gripping a plow handle with one hand, began to read.

"My dearest Nora:

"Last night a long letter I had written you was burned by unhappy accident. But in no number of pages could I add to the burden of my message to you. I love you and I shall never be content for a moment until I am with you again. It is my intention to start back in the spring as early as weather permits. But I am anxious to hear from you. Will you write me two letters? Give one to Manuel Lisa, who will be starting up the Missouri with a party in the spring. Send the other by some trader to Hipolite at the Pawnee. Thus whether I come by river or by land I will encounter that early word from you which I could not well do without.

"Matt."

"Matt's on his way!" she cried. She was breathlessly reading and rereading the brief note.

"When'd he write it?" asked Frank practically.

"It's not dated."

"Where'd he write it from?"

"He doesn't say."

Nora had not once looked up from the note in her hand. Frank turned his inquiry to Martin.

"Where'd you get it?"

"From Hipolite. Last March."

"Where'd he get it?"

"That Omaha boy of his brought it back last winter from Matt's camp in the mountains."

"Then he must have written it last year," said Frank. "It's not what you could call real new news." He leaned over to peer at the paper in Nora's hand. "Look, it's all burned around the edges." His imagination kindled. "Do you think that could have been from the Indians trying to burn something or somebody?"

This suggestion was sufficiently startling to command Nora's momentary attention. "Don't say such things!" she cried. But she laughed. The crisp, defined words of the letter had been a reminder of Matt's solid strength. She could have no fear for him. Soon he would be here. He would be here to approve the straight furrow she had plowed, to laugh at Danny eating bugs, to inspect Frank's muskrat pelts, to correct Luther's tendency to shut both eyes when he pulled a trigger, to make Daniel Austin's maneuvers forever ridiculous. He would be here beside her, his presence animating and giving new meaning to everything in her life. The mere report that he was coming had already done that. In the meantime there was at last, for the first time since he left, the privilege of sending a message to him, which in itself seemed to bring him closer. For that she must hurry. Manuel Lisa might leave at any time.

"Frank, saddle Dulcy for me while I'm dressing," she said. "I have to go to St. Louis. Keep an eye on Luther and the babies. I'll ask Ursule to come over to cook and look after everything."

She was delayed at St. Charles by a thunderstorm, but in the moonlit calm that followed she was able to persuade the ferryman to take her to the southern shore. She rode all night, exhilarated by movement and action after so many empty months of waiting. Manuel Lisa appeared to understand her mission at once.

"I will take both letters," he said. "One I will leave at the mouth of the Platte for Hipolite. The other I will take



to Matt myself. You come only in time. At noon I leave." He held his hand out for the letters.

"I will write them immediately," said Nora.

She hurried to Austin's house. No one answered her knock. She could smell coffee, so she knocked more firmly. From somewhere within there came a muffled ripple of feminine laughter. The laughter ended in a squeal. Nora turned away hastily. She was almost relieved that Austin had found something to keep him occupied away from home and grateful that it need in no way concern her. Then she paused. He was still the children's father, the master of Riverhill. Whether she liked to admit it or not, it did very much concern her. She had every need to know the situation in which he might have become involved. She braced herself and knocked a third time. There came the pad of slippered feet.

The door opened to disclose a plump, very blonde, Germanic young woman who ceased to clutch her dressing gown quite so consciously over her bosom when she discovered the sex of the early caller. Her bright-blue eyes studied Nora boldly and with a quickly dawning suspicion.

"Ja?" the girl said.

The girl was tousled as if but this moment arisen from bed and yet the general impression was one more pleasing and healthy than merely unkempt. Her long yellow hair, though now much disarrayed, showed evidence of frequent brushings and curlings. Her skin, of which more than a little gleamed between the half-parted folds of the dressing gown, was a milky white. A well-defined scent of jasmine wafted from her person.

"I came to see Mr. Austin," said Nora firmly.

"Ja?" The girl continued to stare and made no move to step aside. Suddenly a new thought occurred to her. "You are Nora. Iss it not so? Ja?"

Nora nodded.

"Come in, come in." The girl ran toward the rear of the house, calling out, "Dan, Dan—Nora has come!" Nora

could hear the door opening to the room that once had been Lydia's. "Nora iss here."

The stupid girl seemed actually elated by the unexpected visit of a member of the family. Only Austin could have schooled her to an attitude so absurd. He had been moved by some sly purpose. Nora heard the bed creak as Austin sat up, and his ejaculation of surprise, in which there seemed mingled an odd note of satisfaction. "No! At this hour? Go get her some coffee, Helga. And tell her I'll be right out." Nora heard an empty bottle fall and roll as if knocked over when Austin swung his feet to the floor.

Nora walked about the familiar living room, trying not to listen. When last she had seen this room Lydia had been in it. Now an immigrant girl was running in and out through these too well-remembered doorways. She looked at the fireplace in which she had sat with Matt. A petticoat was spread to dry where his buckskins had laid. She caught sight of her own face in the mirror. She was as pale as death and her eyes were burning. She was in the very temper Austin could only have expected. He must have counted on her being angry and hurt. She yawned, stretched her tight lips, slapped her cheeks with her hands, forced a smile.

Helga came in with coffee, smiling brightly. She seemed so very sure of her position in the house, so strangely confident. Nora glanced at the hands holding the coffee tray. There was no ring.

"Dan said you would come to visit," said Helga. "Dan iss very kind—very nice, no?"

"Very," Nora admitted.

Helga turned to the mirror and began doing up her hair. Her sleeves fell back, uncovering her dimpled white arms. She was a pretty piece. Suddenly she let her hair fall and took from the mantel a heavy gold bracelet and slipped it on her wrist. She turned to exhibit it, regarding it admiringly.

"Iss very nice, no?"

Nora was thinking of the three field hands. "Very," she said.

"Dan's place—on the river—iss very nice, too—*Ja*?" continued Helga. "I think many times I like to see it—maybe?"

"Yes, it is quite nice," Nora agreed. She turned away from Helga's eager smile to the chest of drawers in the corner and occupied herself with a search for paper, pens, and ink.

Austin rushed in with hands outstretched. When he kissed her cheek she caught a whiff of the jasmine scent. "My dear, my dear, what a surprise!" he cried.

She glanced at Helga, who was watching them in the mirror. "So it was."

"You've met Helga," he said. "She takes the most exemplary care of me and my house."

Helga turned to them. "You want more coffee—no?"

Austin was watching Nora for the first indication of her alarm and resentment. "No, thank you," she said. And added, "You are very fortunate, Daniel."

She noticed with satisfaction that her calm was puzzling him. He glanced uneasily at Helga. "Helga, I think we could all do with a bit of breakfast."

"*Ja*, I will make some," agreed Helga. She beamed upon them while she poured Austin's coffee, and left reluctantly for the kitchen.

"These German immigrant girls that are beginning to come in make good housekeepers," explained Austin. "They're ever so much more efficient than black servants—and cheaper, too."

"Cheaper, Daniel? She showed me that lovely bracelet."

"Anyway, she's an excellent cook—and, well, I admit has many advantages."

He paused, watching her expectantly, waiting for her reply. "Really, Daniel, and at your age, too," Nora said, as if no more than amused.

Austin put down his coffee cup. He was beginning to

realize that it was he, not Nora, who was being baited. "Nora, you do hold to the most disagreeable misconception of my age. I'm not a grandfather. Your mother was only sixteen when you were born and I'm less than a year older than she was. It'll be some years before I'm forty."

Nora looked at him. "You look older than when I saw you last," she said.

"No wonder. I'm not a happy man, Nora." He rose and paced the floor. Suddenly he leaned over to her. "You know how I value your opinion. You need but say the word"—he nodded toward the sound of Helga's singing in the kitchen—"and I'll get rid of her."

Nora stifled a desire to laugh hysterically. Her first guess had been correct. He had planned the affair for her benefit. It was so like him to enjoy a mistress even while he was scheming to use her existence for an advantage more important to him. Nora shook her head. "It's not for me to govern your actions, Daniel."

"Understand, my dear, I'm not bargaining with you," said Austin. "I'm not asking for anything in return. No matter how you regard me, there's nothing I wouldn't do to please you."

She had convinced him she was not to be influenced by the threat of a Helga. But there was no savor in her victory. She continued to shake her head and drew the writing pad toward her. Austin resumed his pacing, watching her as she selected a quill. He stopped abruptly before her again.

"You came here because you'd heard about Helga. Why pretend?"

"If I had heard I wouldn't have come. You must know me better than that."

"Come now. Even you are human."

"This morning I feel very human. There's no secret why I came. I came to give Manuel Lisa a letter for Matt."

"Then you've discovered he isn't coming back this year."

For a second she wondered whether he knew something she did not. "On the contrary—I've discovered that he is."

Suddenly he smiled down at her with one of those bursts of disarming frankness which even yet struck her as oddly appealing. "You're perpetually afraid I'll do something that's bad for the children, aren't you? What difference can Matt's coming back make?"

"It will make every difference," said Nora. "I'll marry him the day he gets back. After that there'll be no further point in your making a fool of yourself."

"Singularly true," he agreed. But he still smiled. "I'm too fond of you to want you to be misled by false hopes. The company is not bringing men in. Instead, they're sending more men out. Matt isn't coming back this year. I was talking to Manuel Lisa only yesterday."

"And only yesterday I had a letter from Matt himself. And he is."

"Where was he when he wrote it?"

"Somewhere in the mountains. Now forgive me, Daniel, I must get my own letter written."

She maintained her composure until he had closed the door softly behind him. Then the dismay of uncertainty seized her. She could have read into Matt's letter what she had wished to believe. She remembered Frank's pointing out that there could be no new news in a letter written at least half a year ago. She could not know that Matt was coming this spring.

She was ashamed to reveal to Matt the basis for her worst fear. She tried to write brightly and cheerfully, trusting that he would be able to read something between the lines. In the middle of apparently lighthearted gossip about the family she wrote: "My dear, it is just as well you are coming back. You have a rival. Daniel Austin is *very* anxious to have me marry him." Surely he would understand at least some of the implications of that admission, surely that would bring him back in the grimmest haste.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

MATT pulled in his horse behind the fringe of stunted pines on the hilltop and watched the cavalcade moving away along the valley below. Joe and his two Crow wives, with a dozen related families, were headed for a summer hunt in the mountains, their tiny figures already dwarfed by the towering snow-crested rampart that loomed above them. They were turned toward that mysterious region of rainbow-hued cliffs and wild high valleys around the headwaters of the Yellowstone of which Colter had brought back such incredible tales. Matt sat motionless in the saddle staring without expression toward those empurpled gorges leading onward and upward, as he had so often imagined, into the secret recesses of his Shining Mountains.

The purposeless rage that had been with him for months had at last worn itself out. He could regard himself dispassionately, and a sorry spectacle he presented to his own view. He was in a trap, a trap of his own making, his own baiting, his own springing. He had joined the company, involving himself recklessly in responsibility to a hundred other men, in order, he had assured himself at the time, the sooner to provide for his future with Nora, but actually, he had known in his heart even then, as a device to save the loss of another year in his impatient westward quest. Now he was caught, able neither to get back to Nora nor to get on to the mountains. Meanwhile he had lost that year and was losing another.

Bap appeared, far below and behind him, riding up the slope leading two spare horses. Matt continued his westward watch until Joe and his Indian companions had disappeared from view in the cleft of a distant canyon. Bap rode alongside and looked at him somberly.

"I have told Andrew Henry and Pierre Menard and the men at the fort that we go for two months with Joe to look for new beaver country," said Bap. "They do not know

we are here. They have believe. They have ask no questions. If they have ask questions I have anyway no answer. It is the same with me. I also do not know what now we do or where now we are."

Matt swung his horse around until his back was to the mountains. "We are on the top of a hill in a damn hot sun," he said. "I didn't tell you what we're going to do because you're such a bad liar. If you'd known where we were going when you talked to them you'd never have been able to fool them."

Bap looked away. For weeks he had seethed with a dissatisfaction too deep for words. Now, suddenly, his dissatisfaction found many words.

"The sun she is hot because it is the middle of the summer," he said accusingly, as if he held Matt responsible for the season. "This is July. In July we could be in St. Charles. In July you could be with Nora already many weeks. But in July we sit stupid in the sun on a dry hill in the country of the Crow."

"It's too late to cry about that," said Matt.

"It is not too late to say what is true. Always you find many words quick. I listen. The answer does not sometimes come to me soon. But the answer have come to me now. You say we do not go down the river this spring because if we go the company she fall apart. Other men have been on the Bighorn two winters. We have been here only one winter. All want to go home. You say if we go then all will go. You want everybody to stay until Manuel Lisa he come up in the fall with many more men so that next year the company is so strong we can go into the Blackfoot country where there are many beaver. You say you cannot go back to Nora until the company is great and you are rich so that when you go you can stay. But it is more true to say that you do not go back to her because you have the pride that make you wait until you have put everything in the one place where you want it to be. You do not go because it make you feel more the strong man—it make you feel

good inside—to do first everything that is the most hard for you to do.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said Matt.

“Is it then the nonsense that Joe goes to the high mountains and we do not even go with him? For many years you have talk the most about seeing the mountains. Why do we not go? It is summer and we do not trap. At the post the men have nothing to do but sleep and drink and play with the Crow women. For two months there is no work for you. There where Joe is going is the country the Crow call the mountains that burn—which Colter tell us about—where there are cliffs of red and yellow and black, and springs with water of many colors, and lakes that boil, and fountains that splash higher than the highest trees, and many other wonders. Why for two months do you not go to see these things if it is not that instead you want only to do what is the most hard for you to do?”

“Because in the same two months I can get to the Pawnee and back—and get the letter from Nora that is waiting with Hipolite.”

Tears of sudden emotion gleamed in Bap’s eyes, which he discounted by letting out a great yell of exultation. “Then why do we lose so much time,” he demanded. “Why do we not start?”

Nora walked between the rows of corn, fingering the already browning lower leaves, estimating the probable date of the harvest. The great stalks towered above her to three times her height. The sunlight broke through to her, bathing her in a green radiance as if she were walking through some tropical jungle or among huge fronds of seaweed at the bottom of some tidal pool.

She thought of the day she had plowed the land from which this forest of corn had sprouted. That day she had been overjoyed by the assurance of Matt’s coming. The corn had grown prodigiously since, but even as it had flourished so had her expectations wilted. Days, straightening from



her work, she had looked toward the empty river that had remained empty. Sleepless nights, walking at the edge of the field, she had been able to hear the faint rustle of the growing corn's unfolding leaves but she had not heard the footsteps for which she listened. It was now late August and with each passing day the likelihood of his coming diminished.

Emerging from the corn into the hot glare of sunlight, she came face to face with Hipolite, this time to be confronted with news of Matt without the briefest warning to prepare her. Hipolite was breathing hard from walking fast, and surprised to encounter her suddenly before he had reached the house, but at once he began to bow and beam and talk.

Matt, he declared, was in the best of health; as a matter of fact, he had gained a little weight, to judge by his appearance, in spite of having ridden harder and farther than a man ever before had been known to do. He had been overjoyed to find Nora's letter, had spent three days writing her one, which was now in Hipolite's pocket, and lived only in the prospect of receiving her reply, which was a matter of such importance to him that he had directed Hipolite himself to take personal responsibility for the safe and speedy transmission of the precious correspondence.

"Did he come all the way to the Pawnee?"

Hipolite nodded, puzzled by her vehemence.

"Where is he now?"

"With Bap he rode back to the mountains. Like I have said—he rides like no other man. He tires no more than the wind."

Nora closed her eyes to shut out the glare of the sun and the sight of Hipolite's beaming, excited face. She had no very clear idea of the geography of that vast region to the west into which men faded from sight for years at a time. The mountains, she felt, lay at an almost infinite distance. But she well knew that a man, as Hipolite just had done, could come downstream from the Pawnee in two weeks.

That was not so far away. Matt had come so near and yet had made no effort to come to be with her, if only for a day. A mere two weeks added to the scope of the tremendous journeys he was accustomed to make surely could not have made too great a difference to him. A sense of outrage possessed her.

"Here is the letter," Hipolite was saying. She opened her eyes and took the packet of fine white doeskin, which, unfolded, proved to contain a sheaf of many closely written pages. "It is a very big letter. For three nights without sleep he wrote."

Nora began to read but the tumult of disappointment within her made it impossible to follow clearly the sense of what she read. Even the terms of endearment seemed without meaning. Mere words written at an immense distance could not serve where only his actual presence could suffice. Occasional phrases leaped out to catch momentarily at her distracted attention. "You should know that Bap is your unflagging champion, never missing the opportunity to defend your interests. . . . Little Owl was very young to select a wife but he chose more wisely than any man I know with the exception of myself. . . . I trust this reaches you intact, unlike the last long letter I wrote you, which was burned when a grizzly invaded our camp. . . . I cannot doubt I have many rivals and among them a number you would do well to take in preference to me, but I do not think you will be surprised to hear I cannot bring myself to a lively fear of losing you to Daniel Austin." She paused to reread this passage with a stab of special indignation. Out of the cloud of rebellious anger that enveloped her the lightning of her particular wrath darted down upon this instance of peculiarly unjustified levity. It was true that she had referred to the matter casually in writing to him. But it far from befitted him to take a like attitude. She shuffled the pages together and looked up to discover Hipolite looking at her with concern and bewilderment.

"How will I get a reply to him?" she asked.

"I will take it to the Pawnee and my son, Little Owl, who knows his way well, will take it to Matt on the Bighorn."

"How soon will Matt get it?"

Hipolite pulled his beard thoughtfully. "It will take me seven weeks to get up the river to the Pawnee. If Little Owl does not have to circle too far to keep out of trouble on the plains, he will get to the mountains in maybe another seven weeks."

"When will you be ready to start back?"

"Today," said Hipolite. "This was Matt's command. He does not wish one hour added to the time he must wait to hear from you."

"Come back in the morning," said Nora. "I must have more time to think over what I shall write."

That night she sat on the porch in the warm darkness, no more ready than under the first shock of her disappointment to make the effort to compose her reply. The sharpness of her resentment had been succeeded by a listless weight of depression.

She heard the softly padding hoofbeats of Austin's horse on the St. Charles road. She had not expected him so soon. He had spent but two days in St. Louis on this last visit there. When he had stabled the horse and started toward the house, she listened to his tread to discover whether he was sober. He was. Since June he had spent much of his time at Riverhill and his behavior had again been beyond criticism, as during the first months after Lydia's death. She went in and lighted a candle.

The instant he entered he came toward her, his attention fixed on her with that eager, pained scrutiny with which she was so familiar. He was perpetually expectant of some change in her temper. He looked drawn and nervous. She felt a perverse twinge of sympathy for him. These past months he had doubted, yet feared, Matt's coming, in a state of suspense second only to her own.

"I've heard from Matt," she said. "He's not coming back this year."

Austin dropped into a chair. After a while he looked up at her. For a moment he seemed entirely sincere. "I'm always unhappy to see you unhappy," he said. "But I'm glad, too. For myself, of course, but for you as well, my dear. How many blows must you suffer before you bring yourself to recognize the truth? To him what he is doing out there is of first importance and it will always come first with him. You may as well make up your mind to that."

"I have," said Nora.

Austin nodded with grave sympathy. "You are very wise."

"But it makes no difference in the way I feel about him," she added.

"You're a wonderful girl, Nora. A better woman than any man deserves—including me. So you're going to keep on waiting for him." His fingers began to drum absently on the table beside him.

"Yes." Now that he had learned there was no further chance of Matt's appearing this year, she knew that already he was considering some new device to make her resistance more difficult.

He rose and sat on the table beside which she stood. He made no move to touch her but his smile was warmly personal, affectionate, sympathetic. "You know there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, Nora. I'm always ready to do anything you'll let me do. And there's one thing you can be sure of. No matter how difficult it is for me—at times—I want you to stay here—as long as you wish. You must believe that."

"Thank you, Daniel." She knew he was leading to something.

"Though I'm hard-pressed at the moment, I'm determined not to sacrifice anything here. It was a mistake to sell those field hands. I know it now. It's a mistake I'll not make again."

"What are you going to do instead?"

"If I find I have to, I'll sell the house in town."

"Then you'll live here—all the time?"

"Why not? It's my home. Is it then so unnatural that I might like to spend my time in the same house with my children?"

"Of course not, Daniel. And that girl—do you plan to bring her here?"

"You don't think any too well of me, do you, Nora? Anyway, the answer is no. I do not feel the slightest inclination to bring my mistress to live with my children."

As she knew he had intended, she already saw the threat that loomed behind the veils of his ostensible tolerance and amiability. "Then are you thinking of marrying her?" she asked.

Austin gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling, his manner as deliberate as if this were a question they could both consider with perfect equanimity. "I admit I have given the possibility some thought—at times. After all, I don't intend to remain celibate the rest of my life. I know Helga fairly well by now. I'm fond of her. She's young and pretty and strong and healthy. She can't hold a candle to you, Nora. I've no illusions about that. But in this life most people have to come around sooner or later to second choices. As a second choice Helga is not so bad. I think she'd make me a good wife." He looked again at Nora, moved to her, and placed a hand on her arm. "Don't look at me like that. I haven't a knife at your throat. In any event, I'll give you plenty of warning. Plenty. You'll have as much time as you want to think it over. And besides, this can still be your home. You must never forget that. You do understand, don't you?"

"I understand, Daniel."

She drew away, lighted a second candle from the first, and started for the stairs. He made no attempt to restrain her. As she slowly ascended she heard the creak of the cupboard door and the rattle of bottle and glass. She did not look back.

She paused in the doorway of the younger children's room. The candlelight fell on the peacefully innocent faces

of sleeping Mark and Linda and Danny. Frank and Luther were, as was she herself, old enough to fend for themselves. But these three were so little and helpless. They were babies. There was no use trying to remind herself that they were Austin's. To her they were Lydia's and thus now her own. She could never permit their passing into the keeping of a Helga.

She moved on slowly to her room. She paused to listen. In the silence the house seemed to her to have a living presence as if, like the sleeping children, it breathed. This was her house, her personal fortress. Closing her eyes, she could see it all: the flagstones, the great double-hearthed kitchen, the cool, sweet-smelling storeroom, the flowing well, the garden, the orchard, the hedge—her world. She could never give this up. She was face to face with the bleak truth. When the time came to choose, when she could no longer procrastinate; when she must come to the moment of decision, she knew what she would do. She knew there was nothing she would not do to hold to her house and to her children.

She drew the sheet of paper toward her. Her letter to Matt was a cry for help.

"You must come back to me at once," she wrote.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

NORA counted the weeks, imagining each day the probable day's advance in the progress of her appeal toward Matt's knowledge of it. Allowing for some inevitable delays in Hipolite's confident schedule, she estimated that Matt would receive her letter toward the end of November at the latest. This she knew was perilously near the onset of winter, which would make his return by river impossible and by land most difficult. But she had no doubt of his ability to surmount whatever difficulties of weather or cir-

cumstance might bar his path. If he had the will to come, he would find the way.

Hipolite's schedule suffered early distortion, however, due to the normal vicissitudes of any wilderness journey. He preferred to travel alone in a very small canoe, because when alone there was less interference with the range and variety of those precautions suggested by his fearful nature. It was his custom never to venture out into the open river but always to paddle circuitously near the fringe of wooded shores, making short dashes from one possible hiding place to the next, pausing frequently to study the vista ahead. Thus he had lost four days before he reached the mouth of the Kansas.

This was a river gauntlet Hipolite particularly dreaded. The Kansas were shrewd and skillful robbers, taking care never to kill their victims lest the outrage draw punitive retaliation from the soldiers at Bellefontaine, but nevertheless taking the greatest delight in looting, stripping, and beating any passing trader they could catch. Under cover of darkness Hipolite worked his way upward in the shadow of the opposite shore, but he proceeded with such furtive care that the coming of daylight found him still in the danger zone.

He carried his canoe over a sandbar and hid himself and his craft in the reeds lining one of the many lagoons that paralleled the main bed of the river. In the afternoon while Hipolite waited, dozing, for the coming of night to cover the resumption of his journey, a band of a dozen Kansas families crossed the river to fish in the lagoon. They found the fishing good and toward evening, to Hipolite's horror, they began to build cooking fires and to set up smoking racks on the sandspits.

Hipolite lay in the bottom of his canoe in the reeds, trembling in momentary apprehension of being discovered, fearing to make the slightest move lest he attract attention. The next day the weather continued pleasant and the fishing good. The Indians lingered in their camp on the sandspit

the better part of a week, fishing, smoking or cooking their catch, swimming, basking in the sun, playing games, while Hipolite, listening to the sound of these activities he could not see, remained perpetually terrified. He became so nervous that the raw bacon and uncooked corn meal which constituted his sole food supply made him ill and the occasional frog that hopped into his canoe, when eaten, agreed with him no better. When at last the Indian fishing party departed he was so weak from fright and hunger that he could barely travel and he lost three more days before he attained the sanctuary of his post at the Pawnee.

"Start now and keep on going until you find Matt," Hipolite instructed Little Owl sternly. "This writing is from his woman and it cannot come to him too soon."

Little Owl welcomed the assignment. He was the one figure among the Pawnee, Omaha, Oto and Missouri who had ever ranged as far as the country of the Crow. That journey had gained him enormous prestige. People listened to him in any gathering and had ceased even to think of him as the young man with the missing hand. He was eager to add to his reputation as one who was well acquainted with distant lands and little-known nations. Shedeia accepted her duty to accompany him without hesitation or complaint. It did not occur to her to be alarmed by the prospect that her baby might come before the first snow fell.

Little Owl kept to the ridges and rises of land on his northward journey. This added to the risk of their being sighted from a distance by possible enemies, but he was confident their horses were fast enough to outdistance any ordinary pursuit. He had need to be always able himself to see far toward the horizon, for this was the season when great fires raged across the plains, often proving a menace more dangerous than any human enemy. In the fall when the grass was dry any fire, once started, persisted until extinguished by rain, spreading endlessly over the vast expanse of the grasslands, blackening the earth for hundreds of miles, running now in this direction and now in that



with the varying course of the wind, smoldering when the wind dropped only to burst out anew when the wind revived. Wandering Indian hunting and war parties set the fires, sometimes to drive game, sometimes to mystify and alarm their enemies, often merely for the sake of the excitement of initiating a spectacle so tremendous. On thin-soiled slopes where the grass was short these fires spread slowly and fitfully, but in the richer bottoms where the dry grass and weeds stood eight and ten feet high the fires burned with a terrifying roar of flame that in a strong wind swept across the face of the earth at a speed to overtake even the fleet antelope.

Little Owl saw the smoke of such a fire when it was a mere smudge on the northern horizon. He swung wide to the westward. There was little wind and no apparent emergency. But the second day the northeast wind suddenly freshened and the pall of smoke in the distance became livid with flame. He decided not to exhaust their horses by attempting either to outrun or to encircle the first and chose instead to await its approach on a bald hilltop where the thin grass provided scant fuel. He planned when the fire declined upon reaching the barren spot where they waited to dash through the flames and smoke to the safety of the burned-over windward side.

They sat motionless on their horses and watched the conflagration come on. Waves of heat and choking clouds of smoke enveloped them. Their horses became frantic with fear and were to be controlled at all only by permitting them to gallop in wild tight circles on the hilltop. Then, as Little Owl had foreseen, the flames that had been leaping forty feet in the air as they roared through the thick grass at the foot of the hill diminished as the fire raced up the slope.

"Now!" he yelled to Shedeas.

When she did not reply he looked around to see that she was slumped forward, reeling as if the smoke and excitement had made her faint, staying in the saddle at all only because

she instinctively clutched at her horse's mane. The horse, freed of guidance, yielded to panic and galloped down the unburned slope away from the onrushing fire, but in the path it was certain to take.

By the time Little Owl had overtaken her both horses were struggling and plunging in the entangling high grass of the valley bottom. The flames behind them, having crossed the rise, were finding new fuel and once more beginning to roar. Recovering a little, Shedeas straightened and looked at him, her eyes wide with horror that she should have been guilty of this shameful weakness.

"Hang on," he commanded. "Don't fall off your horse!" He was forced to shout to make himself heard above the explosive crackle of the fire.

She nodded. They turned across the valley bottom toward the next slope. But in the tangled maze of dried grass, weeds, and brush, rising on all sides higher than their heads, they could make progress at all only by following the winding game trails. The heat of the fire was already searing their backs. The wind was sweeping burning wisps of grass and detached tongues of flame through the air over their heads. Their plight seemed hopeless when through a rift in the billowing clouds of smoke Little Owl saw the rising spiral of waterfowl. He knew this must mark some kind of a pond and as their only hope turned toward it.

The cattails around the margins of the water hole were beginning to blaze like candles as they threw themselves prone into the mud and water. There was no possibility of holding their fear-crazed horses. The screaming animals broke away to plunge into the fire. Little Owl and Shedeas squirmed down into the ooze, lifting their faces only to take occasional gulps of the scorching air.

They could feel the water growing warm. Little Owl blistered his arm and hand while plastering Shedeas's head with mud to protect her when she raised her face above the water to breathe. For one terrible moment a solid sheet of flame filled the air over the surface of the water hole.

But the very violence and fury of the blaze accelerated its swift passage. The first swirl of cooler air out of the wind that was driving the fire onward found them still alive.

Little Owl sat up among the smoking embers floating on the water and considered their situation. He came soon to a decision. They were some hundreds of miles from the Pawnee. But even had they been nearer, his pride would not have permitted him to return after having lost his horses. They had set out for the Crow country. They would continue even though on foot. Shedeabow bowed her head in acquiescence. She kept her face averted from him because of her shame that it was her faintness that had brought this disaster upon him.

For days they walked across the blackened waste before they again reached a country that had not been burned. There was no game, but they found enough to eat by digging the half-roasted roots of the prairie apple and looting the supplies of heat-parched seeds from the nests of ants and mice. When at last they had crossed the border of the fire's destruction, they found food in luxurious plenty, for at this season the wild currants, chokeberries, plums, and grapes were ripe and they could eat more than their fill without even slowing their step.

But here, where the grass still stood, once more they found the earth before them blackened. Again a smudge appeared on the northern horizon, though this time it was not smoke but dust. An immense aggregation of buffalo was on the move, stirred by that strange wild instinct which periodically seized a herd and caused it to rush on for scores of miles, never swerving or pausing, though hundreds in the front ranks were crushed against banks, pushed over cliffs, mired in marshes, drowned in rivers. This animal avalanche, surmounted by a pall of dust like a storm cloud, was sweeping down upon the two standing helpless and on foot in the middle of the treeless plain.

Little Owl saw at some distance one of those piles of elk antlers that had accumulated through the ages as successive

generations of superstitious hunters in passing had added their offerings to the collection to assure themselves of continued fortune. This primitive wilderness altar seemed their one possible refuge. He seized Shedeas's hand and started to run toward it. Usually so fleet of foot, she seemed unable to keep up. She was a drag on his running, so that he had to jerk her along after him. She stumbled repeatedly and finally fell. He whirled and stood over her. She had sunk to her knees. Her head was bowed in abject misery and she had covered her face with her hands.

"Get up," he commanded.

She shivered, uncovered her face, and looked up at him. Down her cheeks streamed tears of shame that again she had failed him.

"I cannot," she confessed. "The baby comes."

His face lighted up with a kind of fierce elation. He glanced defiantly toward the oncoming herd. "It is a good omen," he said. "He will be a great buffalo-hunter." He spread his blanket and pressed her down upon it. "This is the time for you to be brave. Then he also will always be brave."

Little Owl could now distinguish the individual black figures of the buffalo. The pounding of thousands of hoofs was audible. He ran to collect as many shrubs of greasewood and sage as he could gather.

Now he could see the buffalos' dangling beards, their humps, their short stubby horns, their fierce little eyes. The earth shook. The avalanche was amost upon him and seemed each second more irresistible.

With flint and steel he struck a spark and lighted one of the dry shrubs. He whirled it about his head until it blazed. Taking a position at the head of Shedeas's couch, he began to leap and dance and brandish his torch. The buffalos in the first rank, despite their strange and mad excitement, were startled by the rare spectacle of fire flashing before their eyes and swerved ever so slightly to plow past on either side. Little Owl caught up another shrub and another

to keep his torch alight. The herd pressed so close upon him that often his waving torch singed their hair as they brushed past him. The dust eddied in suffocating clouds, out of which the gigantic shaggy figures hurtled, to snort with surprise upon sighting his figure tipped with fire and at the last second to veer one way or the other the inches sufficient to clear him. The sea of black bodies flowed around and all but engulfed the one tiny island above which danced the feeble beacon of flickering and desperately replenished flame.

Little Owl had no idea how long this sea beat upon his island. But finally he was conscious that there was a greater proportion of calves among the cows and bulls galloping past. The herd was no longer so closely packed. Individual animals had room to swerve without waiting until the last second. Suddenly he was aware that he could hear the sound of his own hoarse yells. A gust of wind lifted the curtain of dust. Still to come were only the stragglers, the sick, and the aged, lumbering on anxiously to keep up with the herd. The storm had passed.

He turned to look at Shedeá. She was sitting up, wrapping her doeskin skirt about a small object that squirmed. An impatient and angry cry burst from the folds of the skirt. Little Owl dropped to his knees. Shedeá looked at him with a smile of shy pride and nodded.

"A boy," she said.

Little Owl returned her nod with one that was calm. This he had taken for granted. She drew back the folds of doeskin to uncover the small angry figure that was still wet, and muddled as well by the clouds of dust that had settled upon everything in the world into which he had arrived. Little Owl controlled his great surge of relief at the sight of the two clenched fists of the perfectly formed hands.

He coughed and stood up quickly. Now more than ever he could consider himself a man. He looked off toward the cloud-crowned shadow of the Black Hills to the north. The immediate question now was not so much to get on to the

Crow country as it was to foresee the needs of mother and child with the winter coming on. He felt his responsibilities as the head of a family. In the hills there would be wood for shelter and fire.

Shedea stood beside him, ready to travel. At the first stream she washed herself and the baby. She was able to keep up for as many hours as Little Owl chose to walk each day. Her one chagrin was that her milk was scant. For this lack Little Owl was able to supply a substitute. There remained in his horn an inch or two of powder that had escaped wetting in the water hole. Each day he shot a female antelope or deer and gave the baby the warm and dripping udder to suck.

The first blizzard found them safely ensconced in a brush-and-mud wigwam among the pines of the Black Hills. They were already independent and comfortable, for they knew how to manufacture for themselves any tool or weapon or piece of domestic equipment they needed. Little Owl fashioned a bow. With a thong to fit the stump of his wrist to the bow he could use this weapon as well as any man. Shedea wove a watertight basket in which food could be boiled by the introduction of heated stones. He snared and shot game. She cleaned and prepared the pelts. The snowbound hut was soon lined with warm robes. The cooking fire glowed comfortably in an atmosphere of peace and plenty. Once rested, Shedea was able to nurse the baby and he flourished.

As the winter wore on Little Owl became restless. He could not forget that he was a man with a letter to deliver. It did not become a man with a mission to loiter in idleness. He made snowshoes. Shedea laid away a safe supply of pemmican in elkskin sacks. In February they resumed their westward journey.

As they were dropping down into the valley of the Powder River a warm wind wiped the snow from all exposed and open slopes. Little Owl began to push on faster. He wished to arrive before the end of bad weather, so that in spite of

his delayed appearance he would gain credit for having made a dramatic winter journey. Then, on an eastern ridge of the Bighorn Mountains, he saw the wild horses.

The beautiful animals raced down the slope to the canyon bottom and out through a defile where the rock walls were only a few feet apart. The sight stirred Little Owl's pride. He was reluctant to appear among the Crow as a poor man on foot. He considered it much better to arrive well mounted, as befitted his reputation and his status as the head of a family. To capture the wild horses required time, but this he cheerfully devoted to the project.

In the defile just out of sight of the higher slopes he built a pen of willow saplings. Shede's station was to be on a ledge above to drop the gate when the moment came. Little Owl returned to the ridge and waited patiently for days until the little herd returned there to graze. Again he frightened them. Just as before, as he anticipated, they galloped down to the canyon bottom and out through the defile. This time, however, they plunged straight into his corral.

It cost him another month to break the four best of the wild horses. But he counted the time well spent. When at last he came upon the first camp of the Crow, he was able to enter it in a manner that befitted a man of distinction, with himself and his wife well mounted and each leading a fine spare horse.

At the trading post on the Bighorn, however, he discovered that his long journey had not yet ended. The most hazardous lap lay still before him. For here he learned that the whole body of white traders and trappers, reinforced by the men Manuel Lisa had brought up the previous autumn, had marched to the west to the very borders of the Blackfoot country, where they had laid out their spring trapping lines beyond the Three Forks of the Missouri. It was their hope to overawe the Blackfeet by this display of force, thus paving the way to a treaty of friendship and commerce, and it was their determination, in any event, to trap that richest

of all beaver areas with or without Blackfoot consent. According to Little Owl's Crow informants the attempts at appeasement had failed. That much-dreaded borderland which always had swarmed with a singularly belligerent variety of grizzlies now swarmed with even more belligerent Blackfeet.

"That is no country for a boy to travel," observed a stalwart Crow warrior.

Little Owl smiled blandly. "They are only Blackfeet," he remarked. "And I am not a Crow."

Much pleased with the success of this insult, he rode on toward the Three Forks. This opportunity to add to his reputation in the eyes of the Crow and the traders and eventually, when they heard of it, of his own people, caused him much satisfaction. He felt no great misgivings. It was true he had narrowly escaped being brought to grief by the prairie fire and the buffalo stampede, but these were great natural catastrophes with which no man could well deal singlehandedly. He was confident of his ability to avoid grizzlies and outwit Blackfeet.

His confidence was well founded. He circled widely to the north, knowing how well watched were the trails leading west from the Bighorn, threaded his way through the tangle of hills around the headwaters of the Judith and the Mussel-shell, made sudden dashes and unexpected pauses, doubled at times on his tracks like a fox running before the hounds, conducted himself always as if he were being at the moment pursued, until at last he was able to make his run for the camp at the Three Forks.

He paused in a clump of willows to rest the horses, for he did not wish to arrive sweating and seeming anxious among the white men. After he had rubbed down the horses he and Shedeas mounted and started on with the intention of riding in at an appropriate nonchalant pace.

But the moment he appeared in the open there was a remarkable stir of excitement in the camp and a second later a fusillade of rifle shots. Happily the range was long



and there was a violent cross-wind, so that the bullets merely kicked up dust below and to the right. Astonished, Little Owl whirled back into the cover of the willows. When he looked again a score or more of white men were hastily mounting horses with the obvious intention of pursuing him. To them, evidently, all Indians were Blackfeet. He circled beyond the willows and came out on a hilltop, where he began making vigorous identification signals with his blanket. The white men, however, were either too excited to notice the signals or too inexperienced to realize their significance, for the only result of this effort was to provoke a new volley and a renewed pursuit.

Matt and Bap were running their trap lines when they heard the shots. They leaped on their horses and rode hard toward the sound of the disturbance. The trappers' strategy was based on the understanding that all would rally immediately to the assistance of any one of their number who was attacked. Their main force was kept in camp for this purpose, with horses saddled and weapons ready. The more experienced and expert meanwhile went out in pairs to trap the neighboring streams and beaver ponds, knowing that if they were molested by the constantly prowling Blackfeet the first shot would bring strong aid.

By the volume of firing Matt judged this to be a considerable engagement and by the time he and Bap had climbed out of the creek bottom he could tell that it had developed into a running battle, which was swinging in their direction. They pulled up their horses in a fringe of brush and watched the plain beyond. Two Indians appeared, each with an extra horse, racing across the open. Next the white pursuers came in view, well strung out, and losing ground. The Indians were headed directly for them and therefore Matt and Bap merely looked to their priming and waited. But the Indians evidently had eyes sharp enough to detect their presence in the brush, for suddenly the fugitives veered away. Matt and Bap galloped out to intercept them. The instant they had moved into the open where they were clearly visible

the Indians as suddenly veered toward them again, pulling their horses down to a sedate trot. Matt and Bap stared, mystified for the moment. Then both let out a yell.

"Little Owl!"

Little Owl walked his horse up to them. He took care to seem no more excited by the encounter than if he were greeting them of a morning at Hipolite's post after having seen them the night before. Shedeá gave them one shy glance and then fixed her attention on her horse's mane.

"And look," cried Bap, "they have the baby already!"

Shedeá loosened from her back the board to which the infant was bound and held him up for their inspection.

"How'd you get here at this season?" asked Matt. "You must have traveled all winter."

"We had no trouble," said Little Owl. He frowned ever so faintly at his recent pursuers, who were pulling up their panting horses on all sides. "Until we got here."

Matt explained that these Indians were friends who had come all the way from the Pawnee to bring him a letter. The trappers roared with laughter. They saw nothing but humor in a situation that had led them to make the most vigorous efforts to shoot two friendly Indians.

Little Owl was just reaching into his belt to withdraw the packet containing the letter when his hand became still. He listened. Matt saw his expression and made a gesture to silence the laughter. He listened but heard nothing. Little Owl looked to Shedeá. She nodded her confirmation.

"That way," she said, pointing down wind. "There are many shots."

"That's toward Otter Creek," said Matt. "That's the one Joe and Drouillard are working." He had swung his horse around before he remembered that these other men were looking to him for leadership. "You, Bernard," he commanded the nearest, "ride to camp and tell Manuel Lisa." He set off at an immediate full gallop, followed by the other trappers, calling back over his shoulder. "Little Owl, take Shedeá to camp and wait for me there."

After a mile or two the rescue party could hear faintly the sound of shots ahead, which the strong wind had until then made inaudible. Presently they could distinguish the difference between the sharp cracks of Joe's and Drouillard's Kentucky rifles and the far more numerous thumps of the Blackfoot trade muskets. The thumps steadily became more frequent, the cracks more intermittent.

They burst through the fringe of willow lining a dry watercourse and started up the next long slope, beyond which lay the valley of Otter Creek, noticing with momentary hope that the gunfire ahead had ceased. But when they were able to see down into the little valley of Otter Creek below it looked like a disturbed ants' nest. More than a hundred dismounted Blackfeet were leaping and capering among the rocks and stunted trees. As the trappers slid their horses down the steep slope the Indians with a distinct show of military discipline withdrew in an orderly fashion to the natural fortification of a ledge of rocks on the far side of the meadow that covered the valley bottom.

The rescuers discovered at once that they had arrived too late. Joe and Drouillard lay dead beside the bodies of their horses, behind which they had fired upon their assailants as long as strength remained.

From the ledge of rocks across the meadow rose a chorus of taunting yells. Warriors pranced out into the open to make obscene gestures and fire derisive shots in the air. It was obviously their intention to provoke the whites into a costly attack on their easily defended position. They succeeded. The little band of horsemen shot out across the meadow, driving in the straightest and shortest line for the ledge of rocks and its prematurely triumphant garrison. This instant and direct assault, without the preliminary maneuvering that marked conventional Indian warfare, astounded the defenders. Each warrior became an individual, absorbed solely in his personal fate. The general impulse was to run for their own horses, which had been left in an aspen grove some hundreds of yards downstream.

Manuel Lisa, crossing the creek lower down with the main force from camp, reached the aspen grove first. Cut off from their horses, threatened from two sides, the Indians scattered across the plain to the north, running in and out among the clumps of sagebrush, bounding and dodging like jackrabbits to disturb the pursuers' aim.

The trappers threw themselves into the hunt with zest, riding down the fugitives one after another. Only the fleetest among the pursued succeeded in reaching the cover of the wooded hills beyond.

Walking their horses back, the white men methodically beat the bushes for the wounded and those who had chosen to linger to hide or to feign death. The count of red dead rose to forty-one. The white living began to laugh grimly. They became aware of the extent of their triumph. At last they had met the hated enemy in battle and they had won an overwhelming victory.

Their mood was sobered by the return to the bodies of their own dead. The more than twoscore Blackfeet to die had been represented by the bodies of creatures nameless and unknown, hardly more than animals, but these two of their own were the remains of the two most admirable among their whole number. The score seemed still uneven.

All joined in raising a great cairn of stones over the twin graves. Matt carved a board to mark the tomb. Others, moved to a more bitter and savage commemoration, surrounded the site with a ring of poles to the tops of which they attached the scalps of the fallen Blackfeet.

The twilight darkened and across the graying sky appeared the reflection of flames in the direction of the river. Cursing in new excitement, the trappers mounted their tired horses and once more rode to the rescue. Again they arrived moments too late. A second party of Blackfeet, stirred to vengeance, had taken advantage of the opportunity to raid the camp.

The five camp guards were dead. In the blazing huts most of the expedition's property, including all the furs collected

during the spring, had been consumed. The hills above rang with the taunting yells of the enemy. In the darkness pursuit was futile.

"Fighting the Blackfeet is like killing rats," said Manuel Lisa. "They are many and when some you chase others come to eat your grain."

The bodies of Little Owl and Shedeá were not in evidence. Matt and Bap began to search the environs of the camp. This was without result along the landward borders of the camp area, but when they began to beat among the reeds along the riverbank, where he and Bap stood in the full light of the burning huts, their suspense was happily ended.

"Matt!" came Little Owl's cheerful call from somewhere out in the dark river.

Matt waded in knee-deep and shielding his eyes from the glare, saw Little Owl crawling out of the water up onto a raft of driftwood lodged on a sandbar. Shedeá climbed up beside him. Then after making sure the baby's board was well fixed between his mother's shoulders the two sprang into the water again and swam ashore.

"When the Blackfeet came we jumped in the river," explained Little Owl. "They looked for us but we stayed under the driftwood where we could breathe between the cracks. We did not come out until we were sure you were here. These others," he made a faintly critical gesture toward the other trappers, "they see Blackfeet behind every bush and shoot before they look twice. And now"—he withdrew the leather packet from his belt—"before something else happens it is better you have your letter."

Matt placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Only a great warrior could have come through so much to bring it to me."

Little Owl nodded in agreement. "When I jumped in the river I had to leave my rifle behind for the Blackfeet," he said, as if the loss were a matter of no moment whatever.

Matt handed him his own rifle. "This one now is yours."

Little Owl accepted it without hesitation. "I know it well," he said. "It is a very good piece."

Matt sat on the prow of a beached canoe and turned toward the light of the fire. He began to slit the sodden leather of the packet. Very gently he withdrew the folded letter, taking the greatest care to avoid tearing the wet paper. Nora's fingers had touched this same paper. He could see her writing on it, folding it, handing it to Hipolite. The intervening months and miles fell away, bringing her closer to him. Now her letter was in his hands after having survived the labors and perils of so great a wilderness journey to arrive in the midst of strife and death.

Bap dropped to his knees beside him. "What does she say?" he demanded.

Matt unfolded the single sheet and held it toward the light. Little Owl's two prolonged immersions had caused the ink to fade and run, the lines to become dim gray smears. No single word was decipherable. The page was blank.

The confused and angry trappers had gathered around Manuel Lisa for one of his succinct councils of war. "Two things are now clear to us," said Manuel Lisa. "When we get the chance to fight the Blackfeet we can beat them. That is clear. But so long as we are at war with them we cannot trap in their country. That, too, is clear."

But Matt was not among those listening. It was as if Nora were crying out to him and it was to her cry he was straining to listen. The blank page of her letter seemed to him more eloquent than any words she could have written on it. The sound of her voice had been lost among the winds of the wilderness and he could only know that she had called out to him.

"We have come far to get beaver," Manuel Lisa was saying. "We will not go back without beaver. So this is what I say. I say we split up into two parties. One will go back to the Bighorn to trade and trap with the Crow. The other will go over the great mountains to see what the country is like there and to see if there also are not many beaver we can trap because it is not too near to the Blackfeet." The hint of a smile appeared on Manuel Lisa's grim face. He glanced

through the crowd to catch Matt's eye. "It might be, Matt, that you will want to lead the party that goes to see what there is beyond the mountains." Several men chuckled.

Manuel Lisa craned to look for Matt. He was not among the men before him. Then Manuel Lisa saw him beyond on the riverbank. He was launching a canoe. Bap was already seated in the prow. Little Owl and Shedeas were getting in. Manuel Lisa scowled and stalked down to the water's edge, followed by the suddenly muttering crowd.

"So," demanded Manuel Lisa, "you are of the mind to run when everything here is the most bad?"

"Yes," said Matt.

"You can leave behind your friends when they are in the greatest trouble," said Manuel Lisa. "But you leave behind also your share in the company."

"I still have to go," said Matt.

He stepped into the canoe and the craft shot away into the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXXV

THE flooded river swept them homeward on the crest of its mighty surge. To the usual high water from the melting snows of the far mountains had been added the deluge of an unprecedented rain over the whole valley of the lower Missouri. Each tributary added its boiling brown tide to the roaring, foam-flecked main stream. So many trees had been uprooted and borne away that the canoe in its downward sweep seemed to be accompanied by a storm-tossed forest.

When Little Owl and Shedeas were dropped at the mouth of the Platte, the canoe was beached on the slope of a hill a full mile from the former bank of the river. Below the Platte, each day the flood became more portentous. The air trembled with the rumble of falling banks, each with its crown of hundred-year-old trees. Mid-channel islands that

had been landmarks during the memory of man were carried away.

Riding this tide of destruction, Matt was haunted by the premonition that had grown upon him since the moment he had unfolded the blank page of Nora's letter. Everything in his life seemed to have become as insecure as the material world around him. Every assurance seemed dissolving, drifting, disappearing. The core of his dread was a strange doubt of Nora's welfare. He could no longer even visualize her clearly. The vision of her he occasionally contrived to capture faded quickly into the pervading background of waves and foam and falling trees and lowering, dreary skies.

Of a late afternoon they passed St. Charles without stopping and swung in toward the cliff at Riverhill. The forest that once had clothed the river bottom below had now been swept away and the river roared against the very base of the escarpment. Matt noted with momentary satisfaction how strongly that great natural bulwark of stone stood against the flood. Nora's house had been built upon a rock.

Leaving Bap to secure the canoe, Matt climbed hastily ahead. Crawling out on top, he began to run toward the house, but as he approached his stride slowed. He was struck by the strange air of desertion. The doors and windows were thrown open to the warmth of the June day, but he got no glimpse of moving figures, heard no sound of voices above the sullen roar of the river below. The children were not playing in the dooryard. The house stood silent and apparently untenanted. Starting forward again, he came upon Neb clipping the hedge, which had grown prodigiously.

Neb stared at him in an open-mouthed amazement that was in itself disturbing. "Fore God, Mr. Matt," he exclaimed, "I never counted on seein' you here."

Matt nodded toward the house. "Everybody away?"

Neb shook his head guardedly. "The young 'uns—they'se all gone off to stay with Mis' Ursule down at St. Charles."

"Nothing wrong with Miss Nora, is there?"



Neb shook his head again, even more guardedly. "She's right there in the house—along with Mr. Austin." His glance flickered with a kind of fascinated apprehension to Matt's rifle and then he turned hastily back to his clipping with the air of one divorcing himself from all responsibility.

Matt started on impatiently to the house. It was not his intent to approach surreptitiously. But his damp moccasins made no sound on the flagstones. He stood in the open doorway.

He saw Nora at once. She was seated in a wing-back chair facing the hearth, on which there was no fire. All he could really see of her was a dimity-clad knee, the pale curve of one cheek, and the dark sheen of her hair. Austin was standing beside the chair, smiling down at her.

"I've come back," said Matt.

For a second Nora remained motionless. Then she rose slowly, turning toward him, her eyes widening not with welcome but with unmistakable horror.

Austin hurried forward, smiling broadly, his hand outstretched. "And just in time, too, if I may say so," he cried. "Just in time to congratulate a most happy man—and to meet the new Mrs. Austin."

Matt ignored Austin's hand and walked around him toward Nora. She closed her eyes as if to shut out the sight of him. Austin glided alongside. His smile was now forced and he continued to talk as if he feared one moment's silence.

"You find us snug in our honeymoon cottage. We packed the children off to St. Charles this morning. That was Nora's idea. She decided she'd feel a little more comfortable if there were just the two of us in the house these first few days."

Matt stopped before Nora. "So you did bring yourself to marrying—*him*?"

She opened her eyes to read the scorn in his. The sight stiffened her pride and gave her the strength to reply. "Yes, Matt, I did."

Her sudden defiance restored Austin's spirit and set him to talking again. "And why not, pray? Do you labor under the delusion that you had so much more to give her? If so, what then could it have been? Surely not the comfort of a home or the companionship of a man who loves her—because it is not you but I who have had these marks of devotion to offer her." He saw they were not listening to him, but he also saw the hostility with which they were regarding each other. His smile became genuine. He drew a cigar from his pocket and twirled it between his fingers. "Now I'm going to take a little walk in the yard. I want you two to be free to say whatever it is you have to say to each other. I advise you to say it all and say it now. For I believe, under the circumstances, I am well within my rights. Matt, if I insist that after today you do not come here again." He went out with a firm and confident step.

Matt and Nora each stared at the unfamiliar gleam of hate reflected in the eyes of the other, astounded yet consumed by the flame of anger that leaped between them.

"I don't see that there's anything left to say," said Matt.

"Nor I either," agreed Nora.

But he made no move to go nor she one to look away from him.

"You've no right to look at me like that," she burst out finally. "As if it was I who'd been untrue. I waited—years—for what I imagined we both wanted."

He shook his head. "No. You waited for what you wanted. You knew what you wanted more and what you wanted less. While I was all mixed-up. I wanted everything—and so got nothing."

"Your precious mountains. You've still got them."

For the first time he began to realize clearly what had happened to him. He had started out with a boy's vision of the Shining Mountains. Actually the vision had begun to fade with the first moment he met her. Actually his allegiance had become more than divided and through the years

he had been seeking less what he wanted than what she wanted. Her injustice drove him to frenzy.

"How can you judge what I've been doing and why I did it? You sit here in your corn patch and imagine you know what it is like out there where I have been. Can you hear the roar of that flood? I rode that a thousand miles to get here. The morning your letter got to me two of my best friends were killed by the Blackfeet. To get the letter there at all Little Owl and his wife risked their lives a hundred times." He paused to draw a long, gasping breath, shaking with a rage that desired to tear from her, with his two hands if necessary, an admission of her treason but instead tore from him a new spate of words.

"You take great credit that you waited a while. But that was all that was required of you. You had only to wait. You've imagined your patience was tried. You'd know more of patience if once you'd had to deal with an Indian council. You've fretted because my letters were delayed. You might have valued them more if you'd had to ride sixty days to get one. You've worked without much help. You should try paddling upriver three months in order to get where you can even start to work. You've felt responsible for keeping a roof over the heads of your family. But Americans can trade with the Pawnee in spite of the Spanish, and with the Mandan in spite of the English, and with the Crow in spite of the Blackfeet, and after William Clark and Manuel Lisa no one is more responsible for that than I am."

"I am sure you have served your friends and your country well," she said. "You have served everyone well—except us."

Her bitterness completed his defeat. He turned and walked out. She made no effort to recall him. She felt no inclination to do so. This was the end—the long-delayed, miserable, sterile end.

Austin came hurrying in. He walked softly up behind her and put his arms around her.

"Well, that wasn't so bad after all, was it?" he said. "Any-

way, it's over with. I saw him when he went out. You certainly sent him away with a flea in his ear."

She twisted in his arms and pushed him away so violently that he staggered. "Don't touch me."

He stepped back, alarmed lest she actually strike him. Then he recovered his poise and took smooth advantage of her weakness.

"Are you so soon repenting of your bargain?"

"It's too late to repent," she said. "I'll keep my bargain. I'll be your wife—tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. But today you must let me alone. For one more day let me be myself."

He studied her, his intelligent eyes bright with speculation, swiftly considering the relative advantages of forcing the issue now or of giving her time to recover from the shock of her lover's return. "You'll admit it's an odd prospect for a bridegroom on his wedding day. But I've had practice in waiting. Though I may say, my dear, these next few hours will seem longer than all the years that have gone before. You will understand, I am sure, how appropriately this strikes me as an occasion to drink—to our happiness." His inner rage and spite crept into his tone. "You would not have me languish during this unhappy interval. Tomorrow I must rise to a mood to match your own."

Nora heard the familiar creak of the cupboard door, the clink of bottle and glass. She could feel no more than a vague disgust that even at a time like this he should instinctively resort to the same old petty revenge that had so often served him on lesser occasions.

She walked out into the yard. After the shadows of the kitchen, the sunlight was dazzling. By force of long habit she glanced at once toward the great tulip tree that stood at the juncture of the trail from the river with the cart path from St. Charles. How often each day of these many years she had turned thus suddenly to look, as if in looking quickly and unexpectedly there were a greater chance of discovering his approach! There remained to her no purpose in looking.

Never again would she straighten from her work to look with that invariable, foolish surge of revived hope. The realization brought upon her a pain more intense than the shamed anger that had possessed her when just now he had stood before her. She had sent him away. But she need not have sent him away in anger. They must remain separate. But they need not go on the rest of their lives hating each other. The prospect filled her with a terrifying sense of desolation. She knew she must see him again, if only to tell him she did not hate him.

Neb came around the corner of the hedge. He hesitated when he saw her, started to back away, and then, carried away by the importance of his news, moved toward her.

"Mis' Nora?"

She seemed not to have heard him. He waited, shifting uneasily from one foot to another. After a moment, she suddenly looked at him.

"Jacques Dorion come past just now," he burst out excitedly. "He was telling how the army post over at Bellefontaine washed away this morning. The whole camp's gone. They had to march the soldiers up on the bluff. They lost most o' their horses. Looks like this year there ain't nothin' safe from the river."

Nora nodded, "Neb, I want you to run over to St. Charles for me—right away."

"Yes, Mis' Nora."

"Find Bap Alain and tell him I must see him. I'll meet him there at the head of the river trail as soon as it gets dark."

With a great effort Nab kept his glance from wandering toward the house. "Yes, Mis' Nora."

"Wait, Neb." Her impulse had already become a fully formed plan. "Tell him to come by canoe."

"Yes, Mis' Nora."

At dusk she stood under the tulip tree. The warm mist that had gathered over the valley with the coming of twilight quivered with the rolling thunder of the flood below. The

earth trembled beneath her feet. Nothing she could hear, or see, or feel seemed solid, familiar, restraining. She had the feeling that she had moved into a world of unreality through which she could drift with any whim, without regard for any consequence.

She saw Bap waiting by the redbud bush where the trail came up over the edge of the cliff. He must have noticed her standing under the tree, but he kept watching toward the house. She beckoned to him. He rose and came on, still glancing warily beyond her. His many clandestine trysts had taught him to be on guard against husbands. For the first time in months Nora knew the temptation to smile.

"Don't worry about Daniel," she said. "He's been drinking and by now he's surely asleep."

She could see Bap's face now.

"This night?" he exclaimed. He stared toward the house. "Maybe then it is better I dip him in the well."

"Let him sleep."

"But that," he insisted, "it is not even the most little bit right."

"Nothing is even a little bit right," agreed Nora.

He moved closer, studying her face in the deepening shadow of the tree, striving to gain some clue to her state of mind, desperate to discover her need that he might serve it. His eyes, searching hers, were bright with kindness and sympathy, his face warm, alert, handsome, his whole person as clean and wholesome and vital as the spirit that governed him. She sensed the innate and essential goodness that was in him. With her husband and even with the man she loved she had had need always to be on guard. With this man she could be at ease. Against him she needed no defenses. Here was one other being who was always on her side, to whom she could turn with every confidence. She placed a hand on his arm, drawing comfort from touching him.

"Will you help me?" He nodded eagerly. "You must have

seen Matt since he was here. You know him so well. How do you think he feels?"

"He could not feel more bad."

"It's no wonder. We have done everything possible to hurt each other. And when we met today we kept right on—we made everything so much worse. I don't want him to hate me, Bap. I have so much to stand. I can't stand that too."

Bap placed his hand over hers on his arm. "You want to see him again, eh?"

"I must see him again."

"Then I will bring him here."

"Wait," she said. "Not here. I don't want to see him where everything around—reminds us of things—the way they might have been." Her grip tightened on his arm. "I want to meet him somewhere we can be alone. You know that island below St. Charles? The one they call Maple Island? Take me there. Then find Matt and tell him."

Bap turned a little to listen to the roar of the flood. "The river she is very wild."

"I'm not afraid."

Bap grinned admiringly, dismissing his concern for the river. But still he hesitated. His glance wandered again to the house. "Have you then no need for something more—to take with you?"

"Why?"

"To take when you go away with Matt."

"I can't go away with Matt. My place is here. I have made—a bargain."

"So you will go through the flood and find him in the night, but nothing is to happen."

Facing the honesty in his eyes, she faced the truth. She was not seeking Matt merely to tell him she did not hate him. She was seeking the opportunity to tell him once more that she loved him.

"That," she said, "will depend on him."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

BAP looked out into the darkness toward Maple Island where Nora waited, closed his eyes while he murmured a prayer for that support from Heaven of which he felt so great a need, and launched his canoe from the corner of Sylvestre Clappine's garden. Already Sylvestre's garden wall was toppling. Of the permanent dwellings in St. Charles his was the first to be endangered by the flood, for he had chosen to build on lower ground to be nearer his boatyard. People were too busy helping with the removal of Sylvestre's household goods to note Bap's strange midnight embarkation. He had taken no more than a dozen strokes before his canoe was all but swamped by a great wave. Not only had Sylvestre's wall fallen but the ledge of native limestone upon which it rested had also been undermined.

Striking out into the river, Bap had need to be constantly on guard against the trees and driftwood that loomed continually out of the darkness to bear down upon him. He had intended upon reaching mid-river to turn in the lee of the island above Maple Island, but of this island there was left no more than a whirlpool of rolling rocks and spinning trees.

He landed the canoe on the downstream tip of Maple Island and drew it up on the bank well out of the reach of the flood, which was now rising more than a foot an hour. He entered the maple grove, but his pace slowed when he caught sight of the little fire he had built to cheer Nora's solitary vigil. Thereafter his every step was more reluctant.

She was sitting by the fire, her head bowed, one finger tracing meaningless designs among the litter of twigs and leaves on the forest floor. He stood beside her but he could not bring himself to speak. She looked up slowly. There was no hint of either anticipation or disappointment in her face.

"So he wouldn't come. I've been thinking while you were away. I knew he wouldn't. I should have known that without thinking."



Still Bap could not speak. His heart was bursting with pity but there seemed nothing he could say or do to help her in this moment. Her husband and her lover had failed her, and he, who was only her friend, was as nothing in their stead.

"How did he look?" she asked after a time.

Bap cleared his throat. "Like there was nothing in him but ice—and that was on fire."

After another long pause she asked, "What is he going to do?"

"He is going back to the mountains. This time he is going all the way."

"When will he go?"

"Tomorrow."

"You are going with him?"

Bap nodded.

She bent to resume her aimless tracing in the leaves. Suddenly a belated gust of rebellion shook her. "What did he say?"

Bap's voice was hoarse with the effort his reply demanded. "It is better for you to know what is true. Only then will you know what to think. For a long time he say nothing. He walk up and down and sweat. He call me a fool that I take you out in this flood. Then he say——" Bap could not go on.

"Yes?"

"He say that he would like better to remember the way he have always feel about you than to meet you now under the hedge."

She shivered, drew the shawl closer about her shoulders, and nodded slowly, as if this too were precisely what she had expected. "He is intolerably set against admitting the slightest weakness. For him everything must be perfect. He is even something of a prig. But he is also right. If he had come here tonight we would have made everything really unbearable." She looked away from the sympathy in Bap's eyes and went on in the monotone of a child repeating a lesson.

"No doubt it is better to be strong than weak. Most of all when it must be alone."

Bap looked down at her, at the soft gleam of her hair in the firelight, at the shadow of her lashes, at the supplicating droop of her shoulders. All the beauty in life that he had ever so much as suspected was summed up in her. His love for her, so long imprisoned, seemed to be escaping, to be thrusting outward and upward with a life-demanding vitality like that of the great trees rising around them. He dropped to his knees beside her.

"Why do you not cry?" he demanded fiercely.

She did not look at him. Her gaze remained fixed on the fire. "You must feel to cry. I no longer feel. I only think."

His compassion choked him. He was frantic with yearning to console her, but words were of no avail. The impulse to touch her comfortingly was irresistible. Quite against his conscious will he leaned toward her. She reached out suddenly to grasp one of his hands.

"Let me hold to you, Bap. I need that comfort if I am even to think."

He inched forward on his knees until he was immediately behind her. She clung to his hand, drawing his arm under hers, leaned back with a sigh, and rested her head against his chest. He was glad that she could not see his face, for he was ashamed of his excitement. He was ashamed to feel for her as he was feeling at this moment when she was absorbed in her grief and defenseless in her need of consolation. Nevertheless, the fragrance of her hair, and the clasp of her hand, and the weight of her body relaxed trustingly against his, were sensations that in the midst of his sorrow for her sorrow made her seem infinitely desirable to him. He hated himself for this. It was he, he began to fear, who was the more likely to weep.

"I am thinking," she whispered, "the way I suppose most people come to think only when they are old. Then, when it is too late and their life is ended, they look back at the mistakes they have made and wonder what they could have

managed differently. I'm still young, but the real part of my life is over. Already I must look for the mistakes. I must have made many. Because look what a horror I have made of everything. Tomorrow I am going to a man I do not want and who despises himself because he has forced me to come. While the man I do want despises me. What have I done? What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing—nothing is wrong with you," murmured Bap, agonized by the mingling of his grief for her and his joy in her presence.

"That's no answer." Her voice was stronger now. "Because something must be wrong. I've seemed to be a normal woman. I've wanted to be happy. I've been willing to work for it. Most of all—and surely that's only natural—I've wanted to be loved. I've wanted to have someone with whom I came first. But that's never come to me. Not with Daniel. He's kept after me, God knows, but he thinks first and only of himself. Not with Matt. He's loved me in his way, but always it was his work that came first—and that's the same as thinking first of himself. What's the matter with me? Why do the men who know me best feel this way about me?"

"You come first with me," said Bap.

She was silent for a long time. "There will be one thing I shall still want to remember—tomorrow—when I shall be really old, when the living part of my life will be over. I shall want to remember the way you looked at me that first day I saw you on the landing at St. Charles. I shall want to remember that once—years ago—I was wanted like that."

"I have wanted you like that," whispered Bap, "each day since."

She did not lean forward away from him or release his hand. He did not dare to move. He wondered if she could feel the thumping of his heart. But that was something he could not still.

"But not once through all these years have you looked at me that way again."

"You belonged to my friend."

Again she was silent for a long time. "I no longer belong to him. Instead, I am wife to a fool."

Bap lifted his head to stare despairingly at the shadowed canopy of the trees above because he could no longer stand to look down upon her hair pressed softly against him. "But still you love only him," he insisted.

He could tell that she was shaking her head because he could feel the slow movement, like a caress, against his chest. "No one of us has the right to say he loves. Except only you, Bap. Only you have known what love means." Her low voice took on a dreamlike quality, as if she were speaking without conscious impulse. "And you are the only one of us now who is even capable of knowing happiness. Why must you too miss everything?"

Bap began to tremble, unable to move or speak. It seemed to him that a shaft of incredibly brilliant light had descended upon him, but that this served only to reveal his utter unworthiness. She tipped her head back until she could look up at him. He saw in her face the compassion for him that he would have thought it was for him to feel for her.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

THE first glint of dawn appeared in the east behind a bank of low clouds that was in itself as mud-colored as if the brown flood had mounted even into the sky. Matt sat beside his canoe, already stocked with the simple necessities for his upriver journey. In the night he had withdrawn to the seclusion of Alexis Papin's brush-fringed sheep pasture, now become, with the rising water, the new riverbank. Here, alongside the cart path from Riverhill, he could watch for Bap's return whether he came by land or by river.

Matt had retreated from the water front of St. Charles to avoid the friendly sympathy of the townspeople, who during all their night-long clamor of excitement over the flood, yet had paused from time to time to gather and with sidelong

glances at him to whisper and wag their heads over the sensation of his sad return the very day of Nora's wedding. Least of all had he been able to endure the candid, puzzled questioning in the eyes of Frank and Luther.

The night had seemed endless, though also to have been endowed with that peculiar timelessness that accompanies suffering, as when he had writhed beneath Talle's club. The first pain, too insistent and too prolonged, had defeated itself. He now felt numbed and exhausted. There remained in him not even the spirit to feel anxiety that Bap's return was so long delayed.

"No matter what you have to say, you must go to her and say it yourself. You cannot send any other man—even me—to say it for you." Bap's words still echoed faintly, as from a great distance, through his stupefaction. He had refused, for good reasons that seemed already to have escaped him.

The light was growing stronger. He was reminded of the dawn on the Platte when he had found his horses and mules. The memory turned up a lingering glow of fire among the ashes of his torment. That morning on the Platte there had still been time. Then he could still have come to her. Then, though eight hundred miles away, she had been as near to him as last night she had been distant when she had awaited him there on Maple Island.

Against his will, with a kind of miserable fascination his gaze moved across the foaming river to the island, which was now becoming visible. What he saw brought him to his feet. The little rocky promontory that formed the upstream point of the island was splitting and collapsing. The trees behind were toppling. The island was in the very process of being devoured by the river.

The invitation to action wrenched him out of his stupor. His sickly concentration upon himself was carried away upon a healthful surge of remorse. He had been unspeakably self-centered to permit Bap to embark alone in the night and the flood upon his perilous mission of retrieving Nora from the island. One of the first rules of survival in the

wilderness was that to the most skillful and experienced man when alone the slightest misadventure can be fatal, though the same threat to two men in a position to support each other might be of no consequence. He knew this well, yet he had subjected Bap to this reckless risk and with him Nora, who in this moment of new stress, though lost to him, was nevertheless as dear to him as before.

He strained his eyes toward the island in an agony of self-reproach. Bap had left St. Charles before midnight. Surely long since he had been able to remove Nora in safety. There was no signal of distress from the dwindling shores of the little island, now clearly outlined in the morning light. But Matt could not endure the doubt. He had to know. He launched his canoe on the flood and struck out for the island.

Landing on the lower point, he found one doubt resolved at once. Bap had successfully re-embarked and Nora was with him. For here were the marks of his ax work where he had hastily constructed a raft, the furrows in the soft earth where it had been shoved into the water, their footprints where they had climbed aboard. Probably Bap's canoe had been snagged or otherwise disabled and he had resorted to a raft, which was, as a matter of fact, a safer conveyance on this boiling river.

But at the same time the mystery shrouding the events of the night was multiplied for him a thousandfold. Bap had left the water front of St. Charles in time to arrive on the island before midnight. But the sap still gleamed on the stumps of the young cedars he had cut for the raft, the footprints where they had embarked were fresh, and, judging by the rate at which the river was rising, the raft had been launched within the hour. There could be but one explanation. Bap had come to some disaster enroute that had delayed his return to the island.

But this explanation failed the moment Matt's inspection ranged a few feet beyond. Here were six pairs of footprints leading to and from the maple grove in the center of the island. There were Bap's and Nora's side by side, many hours

old, going in. That was when they had first arrived. There were Bap's alone, nearly as old, coming out. That was when he had started for St. Charles. Then there were Bap's alone going in once more. That was when he had returned from St. Charles. But these like the first three were drenched by the night mist. They had been made as early as midnight. Clearly, Bap had come directly to the island. And finally there were two pairs of prints coming out of the grove together. They were fresh. They had been made the same hour the raft was built and launched.

Matt became faintly alarmed. No darker suspicion crossed his mind than that some misadventure had accounted for their remaining in the grove from midnight until dawn. One or the other might have been injured in some fashion. Yet all the tracks were firm and even. And that Bap at least had had full use of his strength was evidenced by the vigor with which he had chopped logs for the raft. Bap might have decided, Matt tried to reason, to wait for daylight to reduce the risk of navigation on the river. But if so he would have taken heed to preserve his canoe. The last-minute resort to the raft argued that Bap had lost his beached canoe to the rising water while he was detained in the grove. Something might have happened to add an unsuspected handicap to their river journey. If so, he should set out in his canoe in pursuit of the drifting raft. His concern became acute. Again he had to know. He had almost forgotten, for the moment, his preoccupation with the personal disaster that had come upon him this past twenty-four hours. With no premonition of what awaited him, he followed the line of footprints into the grove.

His judgment of the time element was confirmed when he caught his first glimpse of the still glowing coals of the fire. New wood had been laid on it not more than two hours ago. Then, when he came up to the fire, he saw beyond, imprinted on the carpet of leaves and twigs and moss, the whole incredible pattern of those hours between midnight and dawn. To his woodsman's eye the trail of events could have

been followed no more pictorially had he been condemned to stand where he now stood a silent and invisible witness during those hours.

A tree fell at the outer edge of the grove. Through the gap left by its upturned roots poured a winding tentacle of the river to swirl about his feet, to quench the fire, and mercifully to obliterate every trace of the woodland couch where they had lain.

His mind, so recently busy with deciphering the hidden significance of ax strokes and footprints and coals, continued with a terrible clarity to unravel the mystery of the night. Originally she had come to the island, willfully and on her wedding night, to meet him. Disappointed in this, another man had sufficed. Now, the night ended, she was returning to her husband.

He began to perceive the meaning of these events of which he had already determined the sequence. Her decision to marry Daniel Austin had been one to which only he could take exception. But here he had come upon the track of an altogether different woman. This was not the one he had known. This was not the one to wait for the man of her choice. It could have been no great strain on this woman's sensibilities to marry a man she did not prefer. Some dreadful change had come over her. This woman was a stranger. The one he had sought so long now existed only in his imagination. Here was a refuge from the shock of his disillusionment. He had not lost her yesterday, but long ago.

The blow against which he could summon up no defense was the behavior of Bap. His trust in Bap had been more implicit than his trust in himself. These many years his life had been interwoven with the design of his friendship with Bap. To lose that part of his life was like losing a living part of himself.

The water was around his knees. Trees were crashing on all sides. The island was disintegrating. His inner world was breaking up in dreadful consonance with the breaking up of this outer world around him.



He regained his canoe and drove out and upward against the surge of the river. This time, after having so often faltered, he would never turn back. His one instinct was to escape—to escape from everyone and everything he had known.

From the cliff top, a little below Riverhill, Bap saw him swing around the flank of the island. Bap had managed to land the raft and to drag Nora to the security of the plateau above. While on the river she had been brave and strong, but once safely ashore and with her home in sight she had yielded to an exhaustion that seemed as much of her spirit as her body. He had been steeling himself to the ordeal of returning her to her husband, having learned there was no faintest hope of swerving her from this return. From now on she was to be wife to Daniel Austin and mother to his young children. This was a fact of life that, like Matt, he must learn to endure. Then he saw Matt's canoe encircling the island and ceased to think solely of himself.

He saw, too, that the island was disappearing beneath the flood. It had been this, no doubt, which had drawn Matt's attention from the mainland. He was infinitely relieved that Matt had been unable to land on the island to visit the midnight camp site, but puzzled that he seemed to be bearing straight up the river rather than returning to the St. Charles shore. Nora's grip suddenly tightened on his arm. She had followed the direction of his gaze and had also seen the canoe.

"Matt," she breathed.

The single syllable pierced Bap like a knife thrust. The truth to which he had been so willfully blind last night burst upon him anew. She loved Matt. She still belonged to Matt, as much now as a year ago or seven years ago. He had taken the woman who belonged to his friend. The full consciousness of his guilt descended upon him. He had sinned equally against the woman he loved and the man he loved. He had committed the unforgivable sin.

While Nora, clinging to him, watched Matt struggle on

against the current, each stroke of his paddle adding to the distance into which he was withdrawing from her for the last time, Bap dared not so much as groan, for he had no wish to shift to her any part of the burden of his guilt. There seemed nothing he could say or do, unless it was to throw himself from the cliff.

They continued to stand there, leaning together for support like children in a storm, each quailing before the prospect of an unhappiness to which there could be no end. Suddenly they were thrown off balance by a convulsive jarring of the ground on which they stood, accompanied by a sudden loud report that might have been an explosion of gunpowder. This was succeeded by a frightful grinding noise. The earth continued to shake and a crack in it opened, running from behind the house to the cliff's edge almost at their feet. Where the crack crossed the garden the hedge was torn apart as if by giant invisible hands. The grinding became a continuing thunderous rumble. The house began to tip crazily forward. The river, boring away below, had at last eaten into some softer strata between the ledges of limestone and was now claiming the whole section of cliff on which the house stood.

Nora was unable for a moment to comprehend. Yet somewhere in her consciousness she was aware of the significance of what was occurring. She was unable to move, but her mind became active and perceptive. Across it there flashed in nightmarish rapidity a succession of thoughts, some no more than petty and practical and others tinged with the full irony of this last manifestation of her fate. . . . The terrible river that so often had taken Matt from her had now returned, like an insatiable monster, to take even the house he had built. . . . She would need to move the family to the barn, where the stalls would become the children's bedrooms. . . . The peach, pear, and cherry trees were on the safe side of the crack, but the apple trees were going with the house. . . . Lydia's vase by now must have tipped from the mantel. . . . This was the house for which she

had bartered everything else in her life and now it too was slipping into the void.

"Daniel," she could hear herself saying to Bap. "He's in the house. He's likely asleep—possibly too drunk to walk."

Bap shook off her grasp and started to run at a pace that left her far outdistanced. He vaulted the hedge and ran between the rows of fruit trees. The crack here had opened to a width of more than three feet. From it was coming the terrifying rumble, together with clouds of dust except where water from the ruptured well was pouring in. He leaped the crack and ran across the flagstones, some of which were turning up like ruffled playing cards. The house was beginning to creak and groan. The frame was already warping and it required all his strength to open the back door. He stood in the doorway.

Austin was sitting on the floor at one of the front windows as if once he had been looking out. Beside him lay an empty bottle and a loaded pistol. Evidently his befuddled mind had hit upon some design, whether it was to shame his bride by shooting himself or to gratify himself by attempting to shoot the rival in whose company she had spent the night. In any event he had fallen instead into a drunken sleep too deep to be awakened even by this tumult.

Bap did not step into the room. He made no effort to arouse the sleeper. He withdrew and drove his shoulder against the door to wedge it closed.

He ran to meet Nora stumbling along the edge of the widening crack and turned her away from the fearful spectacle. The section of cliff gave way with one last tremendous roar. The house disappeared from view. From the depths rose great columns of mud and spray. Then these too subsided.

Nora hid her face against his shoulder. He held her tenderly against him.

"He was in the house," he told her. "The door was stuck so that I could not get in. But I could see him sleeping on the

floor." He held her closer. "Now you can cry," he added. "For I will find Matt and bring him back to you."

Bap's face shone with a peace he had never hoped to recapture. To expiate his first sin he had committed a second that was greater. According to his simple unquestioned creed he had surely condemned his soul to eternal damnation. He was glad that this was so, because no lesser penance could have sufficed him. And he was overjoyed that to this surcease for himself was added the reward of having opened the way to restore to each other these two he loved.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

MATT'S journey westward became a headlong and demoralized flight. Before the island had dropped well from sight behind him the full meaning to him of what had happened came over him in waves of excruciating pain. These were the two people he knew best in the world. He was familiar with their every physical feature, mannerism, trick of expression. He knew so well the way they smiled, the way they laughed, the way each revealed every state of mind and every stage of emotion. He could see the warmth in Bap's face as he bent over her, the brightness in hers as she looked up at him. Every detail of the scene in the night dimly lighted by the discreet campfire came vividly and horribly to life in his tortured imagination. Stark, primitive jealousy took possession of him. Many times those first days he feared he was drifting on the verge of outright madness.

The tremendous surge of the flood against which he struggled offered his one shred of comfort. He drove against it with all his strength and paused briefly to rest only when utter exhaustion brought some hope of sleep. He kept on past the mouth of the Platte and the Omaha village. He wished to face no one he had ever known, not even Little Owl or Hipolite. Neither did he wish to go on northward to the Mandan or northwestward to the Crow, where also

he was known. Like a wounded animal, his one impulse was to retreat into the deepest thicket. The lair to which he would resort was the far mountains, and he would strike straight westward until he had lost himself among them.

At the Ponca village he left the river and, grimly forcing himself to deal for the moment with other people, bargained for a horse to carry him on. Traveling alone among perils impossible to foresee, survival would depend on the quality of his horse. His choice was limited among the sparse herds of the Ponca, so often raided by their marauding neighbors, the Sioux.

After pretending to consider several others, Matt selected a young stallion, the one genuine three-buffalo horse owned by any Ponca. He was a big brute with a mean eye and an ugly hammerhead, but also with a deep chest, widely flaring nostrils, and tremendously muscled quarters. The chief who was his owner would far more readily have parted with all three of his wives, but when Matt made the unprecedented offer of a rifle for the horse the temptation was too great. It was a good trade for both. Matt had bought a new rifle in St. Charles, but there remained in his canoe the temporary piece he had picked up at the Mandan to replace the one he had given Little Owl, and this he would have had to leave behind him here in any event.

Matt had no acquaintances among the Ponca, but he knew the spectacle of a white man starting off alone across the plains would provide them with a subject of interested gossip for many months to come. He was a prominent figure in the fur trade, about whose disappearance many questions would be asked up and down the river, and sooner or later his Ponca arrival and departure would become known. Therefore he took care to leave them with the impression that his destination was the Crow country. When he failed to arrive among the Crow, he would eventually be considered lost. It was his wish to be considered lost.

His face now at last turned directly westward, he rode thirty hours before stopping to rest. After a few hours' sleep he rode another twenty. The horse, to his satisfaction, stood up as well as he under this forced pace. His pursuers did not. As Matt had anticipated, the Ponca chief, impressed by the advantages of retaining possession of both rifle and horse, had set out on his trail in company with his friends with the intention of using the one piece of property to recover the other. This hopeful pursuit was soon hopelessly outdistanced.

The third day it rained, but Matt kept on, consulting his compass to make sure that he kept to the direct westward line he had set for his journey. According to his calculations, based on the estimates of distances and directions made during his former travels, this course should carry him somewhat south of the headwaters of the Bighorn and on into a region where, judged by his distant view of them from the Crow country, the great mountains rose to their highest and wildest.

The rain made the ground soggy and the horse, by now named Ponca because he was as ugly as his former owner, found the slower going less to his liking. Matt took care to correct these first evidences of sulkiness, but finally unsaddled in late afternoon. With the buffalo chips water-soaked, he could have no fire, so that his camping routine was little more than a pause in the rain. The wet ground made reliance on a picket pin uncertain. Matt looped the rawhide tie rope about his wrist, ate a handful of the pemmican he had bought from the Ponca, and stretched out in the mud to sleep.

When he awoke, chilled and stiffened, it was night. The clouds had parted and moonlight glistened on the wet plain. He lay on his back, staring up into the sky, astonished to discover that the first intimation of peace had returned to him. No longer was he obsessed with the idea that he was fleeing from something. He could begin to feel once more that he was going toward something. The shape of

his life, which had seemed so recently to have been meaninglessly torn and scattered, began to regain a certain proportion. His present journey was but the continuation of that great journey he had set out to make seven years ago when he walked from the woodlot. While journeying thus far he had often backtracked and circled and in passing had gained some of the most important things that can come to a man. He had become a leader among men. He had made a friend. He had loved a woman. These things he had then lost again. But his original purpose remained. Once more he was pressing toward it. Nothing could take this from him.

New energy flowed into him and with it a great impatience to get on. He sprang to his feet. Ponca was grazing contentedly a few feet away. Matt drew in the tie rope. Ponca backed away. The rope was slack in Matt's hand. Ponca's former master had failed to giving warning of one of the stallion's disconcerting habits. During the night Ponca had chewed his tie rope in two. Like the veriest greenhorn, Matt was confronted with the problem of the strayed horse. On the plains this was a most critical problem, for the horse that chose to remain free had unlimited space in which to maneuver and retreat.

His one hope was to remain outwardly calm, quiet, patient. He moved toward the horse. The horse sidled away. Even in the moonlight there was visible a wicked gleam in Ponca's eye. Matt made a more definite move. Ponca trotted away several steps. Matt controlled his rage and kept walking slowly after him, his hand outstretched in amicable reassurance, his voice softly wheedling and coaxing in a tone of pleading affection nowise sincere. Ponca watched him and appeared to listen. Again and again he seemed about to surrender. But each time at the last instant he wheeled just out of reach. Finally, as if tired of the game, he trotted a hundred yards away and placidly resumed grazing.

It occurred to Matt that perhaps he seemed an unnatural

figure in the moonlit night and that this made the horse nervous. He decided to wait for daylight and composed himself as best he could during the interminable hours until dawn.

But by day Ponca proved more difficult than ever. He pranced and neighed and switched his tail. Matt, doggedly stalking him, could not get within a hundred yards. And now when the horse retreated, he cantered away each time a half-mile or more. Toward noon, exasperated beyond endurance, Matt shot him.

This sudden surrender to passion was sobering. It seemed evidence of a general weakening of his self-control. It would have been more intelligent to have so aimed as to stun the horse by creasing his neck. He must get a surer grip on himself if he was to get on successfully with his solitary venture.

He set out once more to the westward, walking hard and fast, able at least to pour out recklessly the energy that burned within him. He snatched berries and roots as he went along, occasionally shot a prairie hen or an antelope, rested only while he slept.

His passion of impatience made him unwary and again brought him to grief. He was hardened to travel, but his travel had always been by saddle or canoe. His feet lacked the toughness of other portions of his anatomy. He ignored the earlier warnings of blisters and bruises and kept on, scorning to admit any physical weakness. His moccasins wore out. His naked feet were cut by stones and pierced by thorns. He limped on, refusing to rest. His feet became swollen and the wounds began to fester. He had been making thirty to forty miles a day. Now as he hobbled on painfully his progress dropped to ten and finally to two or three.

There came a day when he knew he could not go on. His feet were swollen out of shape and showed large patches of red and purple where the circulation had been impeded. Both big toenails had begun to come off. He



realized there was danger of blood poisoning and decided with extreme reluctance to rest until some improvement became evident.

He devoted a week to the contrivance of new moccasins. This design caused him endless difficulty. The easier part was to obtain the deerskin. He needed only to wait until a deer came down to the stream beside which he was camped. But he discovered that a foot was a most awkward shape about which to fit a covering. He had hundreds of times noticed squaws working on moccasins but had not followed the process in detail. He had none of the materials and tools with which to work except a knife and a stiff square of deerskin. He persevered because some protection for his feet was an absolute necessity if he was to go on. Moccasins must take the place of a horse. He soaked the deerskin in water, chewed it patiently to make it pliable, fashioned a bone splinter into an awl, split deer sinew for thread, and at last devised baglike coverings that at least encased his feet.

After a week's rest he started on, limping and leaning on a stick like an old man. Whatever the pain, he had no recourse but to keep on. To his basic urge to reach the mountains was added the force of a more practical consideration. Winter was at hand and he must not be caught on the open plains.

The wrinkles and seams of his crude moccasins tortured his inflamed feet only a little less than had the bare ground. He sweated with every step. Once when he had set a line of cottonwoods in a creek bottom ahead as his goal for the day's march he was forced to crawl the last few hundred yards to attain it.

He was awakened from his first exhausted sleep by an inquisitive black bear snuffing in the serviceberry thicket beside which he had thrown himself down. He shot the animal and thereafter was able to keep the moccasins packed with bear's grease. This eased his feet somewhat and he was able again to make three or four miles a day.

He was further encouraged by the slow change in the country. Ranks of low sandy hills seemed to be converging on him from the horizons on either hand. The soil was drier. There was less grass and more sage and greasewood. The hills presently became more prominent. They were less sandy and rounded; occasionally an escarpment of naked rock protruded. Matt cried out in triumph when on a bluff above a little watercourse he saw the first stunted cedar. He hobbled on with new spirit.

The hills rose higher before him; his way became more stony and difficult. Each day he climbed only to drop down again into the next depression. But he welcomed the added task of climbing. He wanted steeper heights to climb.

The dwarf cedar was common now. Occasional distant slopes were dark with pine. On each hilltop he strained to catch the first glimpse of the true mountains. But ahead stretched only more hills. On clear days he could see far through the clear air. There were no mountains. He had still a great distance to go. But the flat plains were behind him.

Clinging to his direct westward course, he finally came out upon a considerable river valley. He had left behind him the headwaters of the river that reached the Missouri at the Ponca town, and since this new one was to his left, it could not be the Cheyenne. Therefore, he decided, it could only be the upper reaches of the Platte. The northern slopes of the hills beyond were black with timber. But the river itself was wide and shallow and was dispersed over a broad sandy bed, showing most of the characteristics of the same river as he had known it many hundreds of miles farther down. This was disappointing, but the course of the river ran straight westward, offering him an easier route than the hill country through which he had been struggling.

The first storm of the winter struck him here, driving him to the shelter of the cottonwoods in the river bottom. Game sought the same shelter. He shot an elk for the skin to stretch as a roof over his brush windbreak and a buffalo

for the robe he would need from now on. There was a great wind for several days and it grew so cold that ice formed along the edges of the river, but there was no more than a dusting of snow over the sere brown valley.

When the wind slackened he started on, following the river, which continued to flow out of the west. He was much encouraged by this circumstance, for he assumed that so considerable a stream must, like the rivers with which he was familiar, the Bighorn, the Yellowstone, and the Missouri, spring from the heart of the great mountains. But there came a new disappointment when the river took a sudden unexpected bend to the southward.

For some days he followed this disturbing trend, hoping momentarily to discover its course turning westward again. But it did not. From every eminence he painfully climbed he could see the cottonwood-dotted bottom stretching away to the south. The river appeared to emerge there from a range of rugged hills that though flecked with patches of snow were in no sense the mountains he sought. The slopes of the river valley remained barren, desolate, and treeless. Moreover, he was increasingly disturbed by this whole southward trend. He had had his fill of circuits and detours. He had started out this time to drive straight westward until he found the mountains. When he came upon a clear and sparkling stream entering the Platte from the west he accepted the invitation to turn from the main river and follow it.

The waters of this stream were crystal-clear and so pure that they were vaguely sweet to the taste. They were not clouded with silt like the waters of the plains. This was mountain water. Other good omens appeared. This lesser valley leading westward was barren and flat, but from the banks of the stream of sweet water rose a great cliff-sided rock towering like a monument visible for miles around, surely a guidepost to the greater and more towering rocks ahead. A few miles beyond, the stream burst through the spur of a hill in a true canyon with precipitous walls some

hundreds of feet high between which the water roared with the full diapason of the mountain torrent.

But these heartening signs were discounted by the outlook when he emerged from the short defile. The valley to the west continued broad and flat, a barren, level plain with no discernible slope in any direction. The stream was placid, meandering. The weather also continued threatening and bitterly cold, with lowering clouds shrouding the horizons. When these clouds parted briefly it was only to disclose slopes that though snow-blanketed were rounded and unimportant and with none of the bold outlines to suggest the great mountains.

He trudged on grimly, with no feeling of progress because now he seemed moving once more across a plain. His feet, sore, aching, bathed in bear's grease, were peculiarly susceptible to the cold. He cut squares from the buffalo robe to bind them. These clumsy wrappings made walking more difficult and his feet remained cold. Even his anger was cold. He was determined to keep on even if he died of his persistence.

Game became scarce. This was the season the antelope migrated to the shelter of real mountain valleys and the buffalo drifted to well-wooded river bottoms. He was unable in this open country to come up on the rare deer he saw and he was too lame to make the prolonged effort to stalk one. He was reduced to watching for the occasional mountain grouse, which, though edible, at this time of year had a strong and bitter flavor.

The long-threatening storm burst with a bellowing gale. Again there was very little snow, but the cold drove him to the refuge of a cottonwood grove in the stream bottom. He set up another windbreak and hunched over a little fire, rebelling against each minute of the time he was losing. Here, also, he made another disheartening discovery. The driftwood brought down by the sweet-water stream was limited to cottonwood, willow, and aspen, with no single stick of pine or cedar. It obviously did not issue from the

high mountains and since it did not, the way ahead was still long.

Yet no thought of turning back occurred to him. He had failed in every other endeavor. This one alone remained to him. In this one he would not fail while there was life in him. His determination burned in him like a fever.

After a week of bathing and treating his feet he drew on the icy, grease-packed moccasins, tied on the outer bags of buffalo hide, pulled himself erect, and stumped painfully on. The wind still swept the frozen, cheerless plain, but he knew there was nothing to be gained by waiting for milder weather. From now on the winter could only be expected to become more severe. Before long the first genuine blizzard might bring to a definite end his every further movement. Now was the time to throw his remaining strength into one last desperate effort.

Chill gray clouds wreathed the low hills that bordered the plain across which he struggled. He seldom could see more than a few miles and the scene never changed, so that the illusion persisted that he was making no progress, that he was traveling in a void. The continued flatness of the plain outraged his intelligence. He could tell by the thinness of the air and the shortness of his breath that he had reached a great height. Long experience had taught him to estimate distances. He could judge how far he had come. He knew he was as far west as the Bighorn was to the north of his present position. He himself had looked south and west from the Crow country to see the sky-piercing peaks of the Wind River Mountains rising about the headwaters of the Bighorn. But here there were no peaks. Here there was only the flat plain.

The sweet-water creek separated, fanwise, into lesser branches, the upper sources of which proved to be no more than patches of marsh in the unrelieved plain. He limped on, no longer looking even for the occasional grouse, his only food the stale and frozen fragments of Ponca pemmican in the bottom of his game sack. His feet had ceased

to trouble him, for he could no longer feel them. The way was so level that he could travel as well by night as by day. He slept no more than an hour at a time. In the intense cold there was risk of his freezing if he remained motionless longer.

No change came over the plain except that it became more barren, more sterile, more like a desert. He plodded on, his head bowed, his attention fixed on the mechanical motion of his feet. His only other movement was an occasional reference to his compass. His one resolution was to continue westward in a straight line. Only thus could he be certain ever to reach the farther margin of the plain and the foot of the mountains. He was fumbling for his compass again when he fell forward suddenly down a sandy bank and crashed through a clump of young aspen.

There before him, coursing down the middle of a wide sandy bed, was another stream. He lay where he had sprawled, staring at it incredulously. For though it was frozen, there was no mistaking the direction of its flow. He sat up and snatched out his compass to confirm the impossible. He crawled to the creek's edge and broke the ice with his tomahawk to examine the flow of water beneath. There could be no mistake, no question. The stream was flowing not from the mountains but to the mountains. It was flowing *west*.

Reason slowly came to his rescue. On this level upland a river might meander as all rivers did on the Great Plains below. When last he had seen the Platte it had been flowing out of the south. It could have made a great bend as it neared the mountains and this could be one of its headwaters.

He rose to his feet and staggered on, trying to run, stumbling and falling, haunted by this paradox for which there seemed no acceptable explanation, driven by the necessity of disproving the evidence of his own senses.

The next day he came upon a second stream, larger than the first, but like it a winding frozen carpet in the middle

of a wide, shallow, sandy bed. The course of this one seemed to lead more south than west, but told him no more than he knew before. He broke the ice to drink, rose and floundered on, refusing still to believe the impossible.

The soil became more sandy, the sparse clumps of sage and greasewood more stunted. No tree or patch of grass relieved the desolation. In places all vegetation disappeared and the earth was covered with a whitish crust that was not snow but some mineral deposit. Every impression suggested that he was not approaching mountains but was entering upon a desert. It might well have been considered a desert, for he came upon no watercourse or spring, however insignificant, after leaving the second sandy river. He began to suffer from thirst. Hunger no longer troubled him, though his weakness grew upon him until each step seemed a greater effort than the last. He had lost all sense of time.

The wind rose to drive stinging clouds of dust and sand mixed with traces of powdery snow. The air became dry and harsh with an intensity of cold that was vicious and penetrating. His clumsy footgear creaked and crackled with every step. His face and hands, like his feet, became numb. The flying sand blinded him. He drew the buffalo-hide robe over his head and staggered on. Each time he fell he found it more difficult to rise again.

There came a time when, in trying to push his weight up from the ground, he realized that his hands were clutching not sand but frozen grass. He peered from under the buffalo robe to see the bare limbs of cottonwood threshing in the wind. He had reached another river bottom. He reeled and tottered forward deeper into the grove and caught one clear glimpse of this third river before the descending blizzard drew a curtain of driving snow across his view.

It was a big river, more than a hundred yards wide, with a current so strong that it was free of ice down the center. The one glimpse was enough at last to convince him. He

could no longer defend himself against the truth. There could be no doubt about so great a river.

This could only be the river known to the Crow as the Prairie Hen in their own language, but more often called the Spanish River because at times in the past the Spaniards had journeyed up it to trade with the Snake Indians. These Spaniards called it the Green River and said it flowed southward and westward along the borders of New Spain to become the Colorado of the West, which emptied into the Pacific Ocean.

This then was the extent of his miserable triumph. He had entered the country where the water flowed toward the Western Ocean. He had surmounted the backbone of the continent. Somewhere behind him was the Great Divide. He had attained his goal. But he had achieved his purpose without knowing it. That barren and frozen plain—that had been his Shining Mountains.

He sank to his knees, collapsing beneath the weight of a weariness that there was no longer incentive to bear. For a time not even the instinct to survive remained in him. Then the screaming blast of the blizzard stirred one faintly angry spark of resistance. Near by was a huge accumulation of driftwood piled up by some spring flood. He crawled to it, pulled aside some of the outer tangle, and burrowed within. With a little rearrangement of the nearer pieces he had the crude walls and roof of a shelter that was soon sealed over by the drifting snow. There was an inexhaustible supply of dry wood at hand and he presently had a fire going. He fought off the temptation to sleep while he rubbed his face and hands and feet with snow until the fiery pains of frostbite had begun to subside.

He awakened slowly many hours later to become aware of a faint twittering, rustling, and cheeping. A flock of prairie hens had chosen to winter in the wide-spreading pile of driftwood, and they were increasingly disturbed by his intrusion. Their runways extended in all directions among the matted brush and timbers. To Matt, weakened



by starvation and fatigue, scarcely able to move, his chance winter shelter thus revealed the means to live without making the effort he could not have made. He had snow water at hand to drink, wood to warm him, and the simplest snare produced grouse to eat as often as he was hungry.

It was a week before he even took the trouble to dig a hole through the snow so that he could peer into the outer world. There was nothing to see but the snowdrifts among the dense forest of cottonwoods that cloaked the river bottom, and he felt no inclination to leave his fire-warmed cave of wood and snow to look beyond. Most of the time he slept, awakening only to eat, while he slowly recovered a fraction of the strength he had expended so prodigally. He was possessed of so enormous a lethargy that it required long consideration and a great effort to crawl the few feet to his snares or to break up wood for his fire.

For a time his mind was as lethargic as his body. Even awake he remained in a near-stupor. When he did begin to think, idly and disconnectedly, it was not of the future, in which there was nothing to which to look forward, but of the past. He did not think of Nora. She represented a memory from which his imagination withdrew as involuntarily as his hand would withdraw from the fire. But gradually he thought more and more of Bap. The image of Bap was a natural companion beside this lonely campfire. Five of the last six winters had been spent in his company. Bap's laughing vitality, his never-failing interest in the most incidental experience, would have enlivened even the bleakness of a winter in this woodpile. Having once permitted Bap's imagined presence to break in on his loneliness, he was amazed to realize how much he missed him. He could not hate him. Memory of the outrage that had so tormented his upriver journey seemed to be escaping him; even his jealousy seemed to be losing importance. The Bap who had been Nora's lover was becoming a vague and shadowy figure; he remembered instead the Bap who had been his friend. He needed this friend. Were Bap by some miracle to

put in an appearance here, he could pretend to look away but in his heart he would be glad.

The blizzard roared across the frozen valley for the better part of a week, to be succeeded by an astounding shift in the wind that raised the temperature above freezing in a matter of hours. The snow began to melt and to drip in streams into Matt's makeshift shelter, making it untenable and forcing him to reluctant activity.

He crawled up on the bank to look for a more suitable location in which to set up his winter quarters. Here he could see beyond the cottonwoods. The clouds had been blown away and the air was transparent. The nature of the world into which he had wandered was suddenly revealed to him. After one glance around he began to laugh wildly. No more than thirty miles to the north and west the tremendous rampart of the great mountains soared to peaks of glistening and Alpine grandeur. Far to the south and east, their bases below the horizon but their crests thrust boldly skyward, other great mountains gleamed in the sun. But directly to the east along the way he had come there was only the flat and sterile desert broken by ranges of barren and ignoble hills. Northward stretched the immense mountains crossed by Lewis and Clark and penetrated by Colter and Joe Thorn, and southward the equal majestic heights reported by Lieutenant Pike. But with the instinct of one doomed to invariable frustration he had hit upon the one region where, even astride the Great Divide between the two oceans, there were no mountains.

His half-crazed laughter served only to attract the attention of a slinking coyote, but the sight of this creature reminded Matt that he too must find some kind of a den. He was so weak that each move had to be preceded by an interval of rest and his feet could not bear his weight. He could only get around by crawling on his hands and knees. He set fitfully to work with no trace of his one-time energy. Against the bank he built a species of shelter, using the more serviceable sizes and lengths of driftwood

he fished from the pile. With earth heaped against it and sod to cover the roof, he had a refuge from the weather that would serve. He gathered a store of dry wood before the door and waited, with the patience of a man who could not walk, for an elk to graze within rifle shot. The meat he cut into strips and smoked. He was moved to make these arrangements to survive the winter less by a desire to live than by the wish to spare himself later effort.

But he had no more than completed his preparations than he made a discovery that robbed his labor of all value. He found the tracks of an Indian who had dismounted, crept to the top of a bank a hundred yards away, evidently spent the most of a day watching the hut and its lone occupant, and ridden away again with the news of his spying. Matt knew that his rifle, powder horn, knife, hatchet, flint and steel, had all been painstakingly observed and that these constituted untold wealth in the estimation of an Indian. The discoverer of his rude haven had been here more than twenty-four hours ago. Any hour now he could be expected to be back with covetous companions. Fearful of his rifle, they might lurk in the vicinity for days, but sooner or later when he was off guard they would find the opportunity to kill him and make sure of his possessions.

Matt was moved by no great dread of death. He was too tired to care much, felt too little interest in the future to wish strongly to experience it. Again, however, somewhere within him there flared one small spark of resistance. He resented the idea of the Indians' taking pleasure in the ease with which they could dispossess him. At least they could be made to work for the rifle.

He warmed the remnant of bear's grease, anointed his raw feet, wrapped them carefully, selected as much of the smoked elk as he estimated he could carry, set fire to the hut, and started out to look for new and better hidden winter quarters. Not until too late did he realize that another change in the weather was imminent. Banks of clouds were again gathering and darkening over the mountains.

At this high altitude any storm presented all the dangers of a full-scale blizzard on the plains.

He was unable to hurry to a new location, for it was all he could do to walk at all. Moreover, there was the necessity of leaving no trace of his trail. Between the residual snowdrifts in the river bottom the ground was soft and muddy while the margins of the river were still ice-crusts. He climbed to the level of the sandy plain where such tracks as he did leave might soon be smoothed by the wind and set out with the intention of circling, after a few miles, back to the river. He knew by the end of the first mile that he could not go far and before he had made the second mile the storm swooped down out of the northwest.

The wind added to his growing difficulty in breathing. There seemed to be bands about his chest that limited every breath to a painful gasp. The short distance he had come had already exhausted him. If illness were to be added to his general weakness, there was little use in his carrying on the struggle. But he could not quite bring himself to give up. The driving snow was making it impossible to see. This made little difference, he decided with some grim amusement, for he had no special destination from which he could be deflected. From time to time the wind staggered him. The pack of elk grew heavier. He dropped it. Then he rid himself of the burden of the buffalo robe. He did not suffer from the cold. He was quite warm.

When a great blast of the wind at last threw him to the ground he did not attempt to get up. He was more comfortable lying down. His last thought before drifting into what seemed a pleasant sleep was that the wind must have made one of those astounding shifts to the south, for he was feeling warmer by the minute.

He seemed still to hear the screaming of the wind but from an immense distance. This curiously faint sensation was mingled with fragments of dreams that he knew were dreams because they were so disconnected and meaningless. In some fashion he gained the impression that these

dreams continued for a very long time. One dream alone among this welter of disordered fancies leaped out in bold and unforgettable outline. He thought Bap was bending over him, shaking him, lifting him up. Bap seemed so real that he spoke to him, but as he spoke he saw that it was not Bap. Instead there bent over him the hideous figure of a savage medicine man, crazily arrayed in the yellowing hide of a bear with the bear's face drawn down over his own like a mask, and from whose person dangled in grotesque profusion the mummified bodies of bats and rats and birds. The figure of the Indian sorcerer, totally unwelcome, remained with him longer than had the happier presence of Bap, and lingered on, in fact, until he became aware even of the evil smell of him and become so disturbed by his continued howling and gourd-rattling that he fled from the dream back into oblivion.

His next memory was no dream. He knew he was awake. The morning light was just breaking, and as it grew slowly brighter he began to make discoveries about his surroundings. He realized that he had been ill, for he was so weak he could barely lift a hand and the hand was as thin and bony as that of an old man. He could tell immediately by the smell that his couch was in an Indian wigwam. Undoubtedly he had been picked up by the Snake Indians, whose range he had learned from the Crow included the valley of the Spanish River. He was strangely conscious that much time must have passed, but it must still be winter, for the fire on the floor in the center of the wigwam having died down, the stale smoky air was very cold.

The leather flap over the doorway was drawn aside and two half-grown girls tiptoed in with wood for the fire. When they saw that his eyes were open they dropped the wood and fled screaming. There was much excited gabble outside, as if many people were gathering. After a time the flap was again lifted and two older women peered in. But they too trembled with apprehension, and though he made a feeble gesture of invitation they withdrew hastily.

He wondered why his Indian hosts should be so terrified of one sick white man. This speculation taxed his mind and, tiring, he fell asleep.

He next awakened to the discomfort of a horn spoon being forced into his mouth. A very old woman was feeding him. It seemed to be a concoction of dried berries and pemmican powdered as a thickening for elk broth. He pushed the spoon away. The old woman started up in a panic and retreated to the doorway. Too late, he realized he was hungry and that the mess had not tasted so badly. He made eager gestures, but she would not come back.

He was awakened again by the spoon. This time he was startled into complete attention. For the nurse who now attended him had a face that was familiar. He closed his eyes in order not to frighten her while he reflected. At last he placed her. She was Painted Leaf, a young Snake woman who had been a captive among the Crow and who had become a favorite among the white trappers at the Bighorn post. He opened his eyes and called her by name. In spite of the fact that he had addressed her in Crow and reminded her that he was one of those white men whose friendship she had welcomed then, she was terrified like the others, and ran out.

He feigned sleep when she next came to attend him and seized her by the wrist. His grasp filled her with such fear that she was unable to struggle. He spoke to her soothingly until her terror lessened and at last she was willing to talk.

He learned first why the Snake regarded him with such dread. They had been witness to his survival when any other man would have died. Since he had not died, they were convinced some powerful spirit had taken possession of his body and feared this spirit might be evil.

Her own presence was as simply accounted for. Last summer after Matt's departure and the trouble with the Blackfeet a party of the more venturesome trappers under Andrew Henry had traveled, as Manuel Lisa had planned, westward over the mountains to set up winter quarters

beyond the second great range. Painted Leaf had been one of the Indian women to accompany them. But as the winter came on she, being pregnant, found herself less a favorite among her white protectors and decided to come home to her own people. Bap had come with her.

Matt struggled upright in the grip of an overwhelming excitement. Bap's bending over him had been no more a dream than the medicine man's endeavor to cure him. His wild excitement so disturbed Painted Leaf that he was minutes quieting her and persuading her to resume her explanation.

The little she could tell of Bap's travels was enough. Matt could fill in the details. Bap must have started up the Missouri after him. He had failed to overtake him on the river, but he had struck the trail at the Ponca town and ridden from there overland to the Crow. Here he had rushed from camp to camp seeking in vain any report of his arrival. Convinced of Matt's determination to strike for the mountains, he evidently had thought finally of Andrew Henry's post and the possibility that Matt might have passed by the Crow and gone on directly there. At a season later than man ever before had made the attempt, Bap had crossed the high pass that led westward from the Crow country. His horse had died of exposure and exhaustion. But Bap had persisted on foot over this and the next range and had reached the post. Finding no word of Matt there and obsessed with the idea that Matt was somewhere in the mountains, he had seized the opportunity to accompany Painted Leaf southward to her people on the Spanish River. Here his tireless search had been rewarded. He had learned of the solitary white man who had come through the lower pass and established his camp down the river. On account of the breaking storm the Indians would not go with him to show Bap the way. At this altitude winter storms were fatal to any man caught in the open. Bap had gone alone. Days later he had returned carrying Matt on his back.

"Where is he now?" demanded Matt.

He saw the answer in her face and dropped back on his couch, his excitement withered, his pain so great that he was barely aware of what she said. Bap had reached the very edge of the village. The Indians had found the two under the snow the next morning. The sick white man was wrapped in the other's blanket and he still breathed. The one who had carried him had come on as far as he could. He had come on until he died.

"Where is he now?" repeated Matt.

Painted Leaf understood. She went to the doorway and addressed the many people who had gathered to listen, trembling and mystified, to the murmur of voices coming from the formerly silent house of the stranger.

They carried Matt's couch beyond the village to the circle of ashes on the little knoll. They pointed out where Bap's funeral lodge had been set up and equipped with the finest furniture. The hero's body had been set against the backrest as if he had only paused between journeys. Food and weapons had been placed beside him, the reins of a war horse placed in his cold hands. Then they had heaped fuel about the lodge and lighted the liberating fire. They had given him a chief's funeral.

They carried Matt back to his sickroom. This time they were certain he was dying. He declined to eat and he obviously had no wish to live.

But he did live. For in the endless night of his remorse and grief there finally appeared and brightened one ray of consolation. It mattered not how little he had deserved it. Bap had remained his friend. This memory he still had. Bap had never been lost to him. His friendship had never died.



## CHAPTER XXXIX

**A**LONG the banks of the Missouri the new green of grass and vines and swiftly sprouting willows of another spring had veiled the ravages of the flood. Now with another turn of the season the borders of the river flamed with the scarlet and gold of autumn. Matt kept his canoe to mid-channel, his dulled attention fixed on the gracefully bobbing prow. When last he had come down in autumn, four years ago, the hope of happiness had accompanied him. Now he dared not think of that eager journey. There was nothing in the past of which he could think without pain. And in the future he had but the one remaining purpose. He must carry the report of Bap's death to Bap's people. Not rude savages but he himself must officiate at this last ceremonial marking Bap's memory. Beyond this he had taken no thought.

The grievousness of his task caused him to press on after nightfall. His one purpose was to rush on to embrace this final pain. The flood had so changed the waterfront of St. Charles that he had drifted past it unaware before beaching his canoe. He climbed into the town and walked down the long, familiar street. It was after midnight now and every house was dark except for one glimmer of light in Pierre Querrel's inn. He decided he might better wait there until morning than to rouse people from their sleep with his tidings.

The door was ajar. He pushed it open and entered. Pierre and his family had long since retired, but there were two guests in the pool of candlelight at the end of the common room. One was William Clark, looking haggard and worn, bent over a table littered with maps and rosters and ration lists. Beyond the circle of light, in a chair tilted against the wall beside an open window, sat the other, William's brother, the old General. He seemed to be dozing, but there

was a cocked pistol in his lap. And he spoke at once, with casual garrulity.

"Fine lot of guards you've got out, Billy. A stranger can wander the length of the street with nary a challenge. And, stand right here in your door looking at you. An Indian, too, by the smell of him. That's one smell I ain't too old to remember. It's a good thing I came out to winter with you. You keep your nose so close to the inkpot you can't see past the end of it. No. Might be he only smells like an Indian. He's got a foot of whiskers. That ain't right for an Indian."

Clark had arisen slowly, one hand reaching behind him for his rifle and the other shielding his eyes from the glare of the candle. Matt came forward into the light. Clark's tired face instantly brightened with a glow of welcome and he seized Matt by both arms.

"Matt Morgan! The very man I've been praying for without knowing it!"

The old General's chair tipped forward to the floor and he too came into the circle of light. His quick glance traveled in impersonal appraisal over Matt's stained and ragged Snake buckskins. "That's so, Billy. He's got a habit of turning up when you want him. And a man that's been out where he can get to smell like an Indian—that's the man for you all right." He nodded with an air of final judgment and returned to his chair in the shadows.

Clark's interest in Matt was already becoming more official than personal. "Have much trouble getting past the Sioux?" he asked.

There were not two other men in the world Matt admired and respected as he did these two, but he wished desperately he had not walked in on them. Their friendly keen scrutiny made him feel that he was being pushed out into a glare of light. The light was disturbing. He did not want to be disturbed. He shook his head. "I hit the river below the Sioux country," he explained.

Clark laughed. "You're not south of the Sioux country

yet. This summer they've been coming right up to our back doors."

The old General spoke from the shadows. "Might be, Billy, where Matt's been they don't get around to reading the newspapers every day."

Matt sat down unwillingly. It had been long since he had sat in a chair. It might have been a pillory holding him here under the light where he could be studied, and he rebelled against this intrusion upon the privacy of his concern with himself. Nothing Clark had to say could involve him. He did not want to listen and he shut his mind against listening.

Clark began to pace up and down beside the table. The brief animation that had at first warmed his welcome had departed and once more he seemed haggard and worn. "It won't take long to give you the high spots of the fix we're in. A Shawnee named Tecumseh is busy stirring up what looks like a general Indian war. General Harrison's marching north from the Ohio with the only Regular force we have in the West. Out here where we are this little town of St. Charles is the one settlement between St. Louis and the Indian country. I've come over to this bank to raise a company of rangers to patrol the country north of here—to keep out small war parties and give us some warning of big ones." He swung suddenly on Matt. "You're just the man for that job. I want you to command the company."

Clark's words were like the dreadful din of the medicine man demanding that he rise from his bed of illness. There seemed no escape from their import unless it were to creep away beyond the hearing of them. But most of all they were words that required a reply, and he had none. He could only turn one revealing corner of the truth.

"You knew Bap Alain," he said. "The only reason I am here is to tell his people he is dead. He died carrying me through a blizzard—wrapped in his blanket."

Clark paused in his restless pacing. He rested his hands on the table and looked down at Matt. He seemed to under-

stand the irrelevance of Matt's reply. "I know what it is to lose a friend. I've found less zest in my job since they killed Meriwether Lewis." He straightened. "But you've got a job, too—defending Bap's people."

Even the news that Lewis was dead stirred in Matt no more than a feeling that this tragedy was of a pattern with everything else that happened.

"I'll carry a rifle," said Matt. "I'm not the man to command."

"On the contrary, you're the one man to command. You know the woods and the Indians. Everybody respects you. Best of all, you're an outsider. You'll not be troubled by the neighborhood and family jealousies that haunt most militia captains." He looked at Matt more closely. "You're not sick, are you?"

Matt was moved by the sudden impulse to confess to this man who alone among men might understand. "No, I'm not sick. Not in the way you mean, at least. In another way I'm worse than sick. Maybe I'm just scared—the way an Indian gets scared when he thinks his luck's turned bad. He gets afraid to tackle anything. Well, after the way I've managed things for myself I've no right to tackle managing things for other men." He began to lose hope of making his plight clear. "But you could never understand. When you started to get somewhere—you got there. Still, maybe just on account of that you can imagine what happened to me. Suppose when you got to the Mandan country you'd found the Missouri running on north instead of west? It's no use. However I say it, it will sound crazy—even to me."

"You don't sound crazy to me," said Clark. "What were you looking for that you couldn't find?"

"The mountains. I told you it would sound crazy. You remember that first day I came to you? I wanted to go along because I wanted to see the western mountains. It was one of those foolish ideas a boy gets. Only with me it stuck. Again it might have been a little like one of those dreams

an Indian gets that he decides governs his luck. It did mine. I kept getting held up and sidetracked and that, I suppose, made the whole thing more important. Anyway, last year I made up my mind to keep going. I struck out from the Ponca straight west and this time I did keep going. I got clear through to the country where the rivers run south and west. I could see your mountains in the north and Pike's mountains in the south. But where I had crossed there were no mountains. I'd hit a gap where the plains only got higher and drier. You could pull an oxcart over my mountains."

"And that's all you have to show for seven years." Clark did not smile. He placed a hand on Matt's shoulder. "I can understand perfectly your feeling sick. And there's no cure for your kind of sickness that I can think of. But I can give you a dose of preaching." He shook Matt as if arousing him from sleep. "Look around and you'll find you've come back to a country in a worse situation than yours. These days no man's got time to brood over his private ills. We're faced with more than an Indian war. There'll be war with England, too, before this time next year. From their forts in Canada they can arm the Indians and make them a thousand times harder to deal with. With command of the sea and a veteran army they can land on our shores wherever they please, burn Boston, New York, or Washington if they want to, take New Orleans and suffocate the Mississippi Valley."

The chair in the shadows tipped to the floor with a thump and the old General stalked into the circle of light to confront the two younger men. "I'm an old man and I've had to listen to some wonderful samples of drivel in my time. But never anything to match what I've heard here tonight from you two sniveling, chicken-hearted young whipper-snappers." He fixed his baleful glance first on his brother. "When you, Billy, was damper back of the ears than you still are now, we had it out with the English the first time. We had less than nothing to work with then, but we made out all right—

just like we will this time. Suppose they do land on our coasts. They can't stay. Suppose they do take New Orleans. They can't hold it. We've got an army of gun-toting homesteaders out here in this valley, and that's the kind of an army that nobody from outside can do anything with. Let 'em bring on their Regulars and Indians. There ain't no manner of doubt who'll still be here when the smoke clears away."

He turned on Matt. "And you're worse than Billy. What are you whining about? You can't find a mountain to climb. Well, that's too bad. All you could find was a pass you could pull a wagon over. If you knew enough to carry guts to a bear you'd know that any country you can get to with a wagon is a country a settler can take his family to, and that's a country bound to be ours. Billy here, and young Pike, sure they found mountains too high to get over with a pack train of hawks. All you found was our road to Oregon and California."

The younger Clark was evidently accustomed to these angry tirades, for he did not seem so impressed by the old General's outbursts as Matt was. "You think," he said, "you're older than you are because all your life you've been so many years ahead of your time. I'll be more ready to think about Oregon and California when I'm sure we can hold Missouri."

The old General snorted and stamped back to his chair. Clark turned to Matt.

"We've been doing a lot of talking," he said. "You don't have to decide tonight. Think it over. But whether you take command or not, there is one thing I wish you'd do, and which you're better fitted to do than anyone else I can turn to. Take a patrol over to the Widow Austin's. She's still living in that barn with her family and she's bound to stay there. Her place is even more exposed than the town here and we want to make it an outpost we can hold."

The narrow world of introspection into which Matt had

withdrawn as into a cocoon had been rocked by the old General, but now it split wide-open so that he was exposed to the full glare of reality. "The *Widow Austin*!" he exclaimed.

Clark looked at him, puzzled, and then grinned. "That's right. I'd forgotten you used to know her. She lost her husband when their house washed away in the flood last year."

The unwelcome glare of reality became the blinding light of understanding. Suddenly Matt knew why Bap had set out to overtake him, braving distance, glacial peaks, storm, and death itself. Bap had rushed into the wilderness bearing to his friend what could only have seemed to him the most priceless of all gifts, the knowledge that Nora was free. He could not have guessed that what Matt knew made his great effort vain. Perhaps even had he guessed, his own generosity of spirit would have led him on, however faint his hope.

This rush of understanding brought Matt only more confusion. There seemed no ground left upon which his reason could stand, no root from which emotion might spring. He no longer wished to be let alone in order that he might think. He feared to think. He felt instead the need to do something, anything, in order that action might save him from thinking. The least he could do, as Clark had said, was to defend Bap's people. He rose slowly and faced Clark.

"I will take any post you have for me."

His desperate flight to the world of other men involved him at once in normal and practical detail, to which he applied himself laboriously. He spent the remainder of the night bathing, shaving, scrubbing and mending his buckskins, endeavoring to keep his mind busy with the need to appear at least decently presentable when the time came to face Bap's people, to stand before his command.

With the first streaks of dawn Grand'mère Bailly saw him at the well in the innyard. The news of his return spread swiftly. Ursule was the first to reach him. She ran to him, clutched his arms, and peered into his face. Before he had

spoken she seemed to know, as if she took it for granted his returning without Bap could have no other meaning.

"No!" she cried. "It cannot be. Not Bap. There was in him too much life. He could not die so soon."

With the others it was the same as with Ursule. When the truth at last was accepted, the street was filled with wailing people leaning upon one another for support. Instinctively they turned toward their one source of possible consolation, the Church. As many candles were lighted in the chapel as there were inhabitants. The people stayed there huddled together on their knees. Matt knelt among them. The air trembled with the murmur of prayers, the low sound of sobbing. The priest appeared in the pulpit. All eyes turned up to him, tearfully, beseechingly, begging for the mercy of his comfort. His voice suddenly filled the silence, not consoling them but calling upon them to mourn more deeply.

"Weep, my children," he commanded. "Weep, for you have cause for grief."

For once Matt felt no sense of shame to be forced to witness the capacity of these people to expose their deepest emotions. They were weeping for him who could not weep. Finally the lament began to subside and faces were again turned toward the priest, as in the ritual of the mass. His head was bowed, his lips moving silently in prayer. He raised his head and smiled down upon his flock. His face suddenly was bright. He spoke softly.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend."

All turned to look toward Matt. He saw that these good people seemed to esteem him, the survivor, not less but more on account of Bap's sacrifice. With the priest's words the hard bitter core of his rebellion melted. It was not for him to refuse the gift for which Bap had paid so dearly. Pride, anger, jealousy, even his grief, were self-centered preoccupations for which the memory of Bap's purpose left no room. No other course was now open to him than to dedicate himself, humbly and honestly, to that purpose. He must



return to Nora, if she would have him, and return without any sense of restraint.

St. Charles had been too long inured to sudden loss to remain bowed in helpless grief. At the conclusion of the mass for the dead, people stood, crossed themselves, wiped their eyes, and turned back toward the day's labors and dangers that awaited them. As they emerged from the church they gathered around Matt. He was their new commander. He was the man, after the priest, upon whom now they most depended.

He assembled his company and divided half the men into patrols that he dispatched to watch every trail and portage to the north, carefully selecting their respective posts so that no savage could slip undetected into any part of the peninsula between the Missouri and the Mississippi embracing St. Charles and Riverhill. The other half of the company he set to cutting poles for stockades.

He waited a day before going to Nora. He wished her first to hear of his return and of what had happened to Bap, to have time to think of these things, of what his return might mean, and perhaps to send him some word, either inviting him to come to her or requesting him to stay away. No word came.

The next morning he left St. Charles with a train of wagons loaded with stockade poles. When he came out of the woods into the open prairie at Riverhill, his first impression was one of shock, even though he had been prepared for it, on seeing the great jagged gash in the cliff where once the house had stood. It was a comfort, though, to see the curl of smoke from the chimney raised at one end of the barn and the flash of white curtains at the windows. The barn looked lived in, had become a home. He was also comforted by the well-fenced, well-kept fields, the stubble of corn and oats and flax. Nora had been able to keep her land tilled and she had had good crops.

Frank, nearly a man now, and Luther, sunburned and sturdy, and like Frank carrying a long rifle, came running

to meet the column. To them, at least, he was welcome. To them, in fact, his return as a commander was a personal triumph.

Mark, Linda, and Danny came burrowing through the hedge, yelling with excitement, to rise and stare in sudden awe at the tall stranger of whom they had heard so much.

Matt paused to direct the unloading of the wagons and to indicate the lines on which to raise the stockade. He located these well outside the hedge, which he wished to spare if possible. Having set his men to work, he turned again to look for Nora, of whom he had so far caught no glimpse. Frank answered his unspoken question.

"She's waiting for you—inside."

Matt went through the wicket gate in the hedge. The three youngest ran to follow. He saw the lofty reproof with which Frank and Luther leaped to drive them back. The path led through the vegetable garden, splashed with the gold of ripening pumpkins and squashes. Before the door there was a small area of flagstones such as he had laid around the other house. The door stood open. He went in.

The granary end of the barn had become the kitchen. A fire glowed on the hearth. The walls showed the rough bark of the unpeeled logs of his original construction and the floor was of no more than clean strewn sand, but the pots and kettles were burnished and the bleached-sacking curtains in the windows were cheerful. The table and benches, evidently of Frank's devising, were crudely hewn but strong and scoured white. There was the warmth of family life in the room.

Still he had caught no sight of Nora. Beyond, the openings into the stalls had been hung with deerskins, making each compartment a small room. His heart pounding, he walked back along the aisle between the stanchions.

"Nora," he called.

Beside him a hanging was drawn aside. He bent his head, entered, and turned to face her.

She stood there, not moving, her hand still holding back

the deerskin, her gaze fixed on him. When last he had seen her she had seemed a woman of stone. She still seemed one. Only now it was marble, the most exquisite and beautiful marble. For now just under the still, cold surface there seemed a glow and a warmth. She was immobile, expressionless, withdrawn, but a faint flush came and went in her smooth cool cheeks. Her hair, drawn in graceful wings to a knot at the back of her neck, framing the pale oval of her face, gleamed even in this dim light. A pulse throbbed in the slender white throat. In the delicate shadow of her lashes her eyes shone with a strange intent light.

She stood there with outstretched arm, her gray homespun gown, worn thin by many washings, drawn tight against her slim young body, unmoving, yet on the very verge of movement. He could even catch, faintly, the scent of her, not the smell of a perfume but of the clean sweetness of her hair and skin. He must have forgotten how beautiful she was. Yet that could not be, for never before could she have been so beautiful as now—now when she had become utterly unapproachable. He knew at this moment that beneath the creeping horror of his jealousy, deep in his heart there had been no wavering. He had never ceased to love her—and he would always love her.

She must have seen something of his emotion in his face, for she shook her head slowly, the trace of sadness and sympathy in the warning making the negation more final. She released the deerskin and stepped past him to the cradle standing beside her cot. He turned with her and following her gaze, looked down at the sleeping baby.

"My child," said Nora, "and Bap's." She said this much in a low clear voice and stopped, with a terrifying note of finality, as if there were this to be said between them and no more, forever.

His astonishment was like a sudden faintness, drawing all the strength out of him. He sank to his knees beside the cradle. Miraculously, the baby opened his eyes. They were brilliant black eyes, with little quirks at the corners, exactly

like Bap's. And his smile, quick, fleeting, returning to flash again, was Bap's. There swept over Matt a thousand memories of the years of Bap's companionship, of Bap's following him unquestioningly and uncomplainingly, of Bap's eager willingness to live not his own life but another's life through all those years of the friendship Matt had taken for granted, from which he had accepted so much and to which he had returned so little. The baby had ceased to smile and was regarding Matt gravely, a little puzzled, even with something of Bap's instinctive alarm whenever he had discovered that Matt had become engrossed in thought. Matt poked a finger against the coverlet, hoping to draw another smile. The baby not only smiled but seized and clung to the finger with a warm firm grasp. For the first time since he had himself been a child Matt discovered tears streaming down his face.

"Nora," he whispered, "it's almost like having Bap back again."

When there was no reply he looked around. She was not there. He waited until Bap's child, falling asleep again, released his finger.

When he went out the men were already well at work on the stockade. Through the remaining trees of the orchard he saw Nora standing on the edge of the cliff, where once the house had been.

As he approached he saw that she too had been weeping. When she turned to him she was still tearful but suddenly challenging, defiant.

"I am not ashamed of what I did that night. I am proud—and glad."

He was ready now to take up the challenge. "I have yet to do anything of which I can be proud." He paused to steady his voice. "But you cannot be more glad—now—than I. I had a friend who gave his life for me. Now it is as if a living part of him were still with me. The child is yours, Nora, but you must allow me room also to cherish him."

Her eyes widened, staring incredulously into his. A flush of unbelieving happiness flashed across her face, but passed as swiftly as it had come. Her shoulders drooped. Once more she shook her head.

"You are overwrought by your grief. But you cannot always mourn him. You will begin to think—to remember. Every time you look at me you will remember—that I married another man before you, that I gave myself to another man before you, that I bore a child before you came to me. You will not be able to forget that I have been unfaithful to you in all the ways that a woman can be."

"As I have been unfaithful to you," he replied gravely. He saw this response meant nothing to her. He added: "I am not saying we can forget the past. I never want to forget it. I never can forget it."

Her eyes continued to hold his, imploring in their demand for honesty, for the whole truth. He saw in hers no flicker of relief, no glimmer of hope. "But, Matt, you cannot live only in the past. We have the future to face—tomorrow—and next year—and the rest of our lives."

He saw how clearly she was thinking, with what honesty she was determined to confront their common problem. Mere avowals and protestations of emotion were insufficient. She had to be convinced. He began to choose words with desperate care, only to discover that his own conviction was so complete that he needed only to speak freely the full truth as he felt it.

"I am facing it, Nora. It offers everything that I must have—a fulfillment that I could not do without. Once I told you I wanted everything. I still do. But there have been four things I wanted most. Not so long ago I lay on the ground with no heart to get up because I conceived I had lost them all. I was wrong. I thought then I was a failure among men, but I return to find myself a captain. I thought then I had lost my friend, but I presently learned no other man had ever had so great a friend. Even my foolish dream of the

mountains became the promise of a road to hold our country together. I am facing the future—with my whole heart, Nora, with no reservations. I find it good."

She was listening breathlessly, watching him, willing finally to believe, beginning to believe, moved not so much by his words as by the sudden blaze of a man's utter certainty that inspired them. "There were four things you wanted," she reminded him in a voice scarcely audible.

"I wanted you, Nora."

"And you still want me?"

"More than ever."

She put her hand on his arm and turned to look out over the autumnal glory of the wide valley.—"This road of yours—sooner or later you'll be wanting to take it. You'll have to make up your mind, you know, to taking all of us with you."

He took her hand, drew her arm through his, and turned her until, shoulder to shoulder, they were looking not out over a vast distance but at the orchard, garden, and hedge of her own domain. Already the poles of the stockade were rising protectively around it. The slight pressure of her shoulder was warm against his and he was more aware of that warmth than of any other sensation he had even known. He returned her smile and glanced again toward the flutter of curtains and the curl of smoke from the chimney.

"First," he said, "let's think about holding this."

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

WE ARE accustomed to imagine the West of the Indian fighter, the cowboy, the United States cavalryman; we cannot so readily envisage the earlier West before the covered wagon, with its special dangers, simplicities and rewards.

Of all the records of that legendary land the one left by the two great explorers, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, are the most complete and illuminating. President Jefferson instructed them to keep a detailed, daily, written account of all they saw and did, and fortunately these journals have been preserved. To read them today is to be transported instantly to the day and place of the pathfinders' experience. For example:

"a verry cool morning the wind as uscal from the NW. Cap. Lewis took 12 men and went to the Pond & Creek between Camp and the old village and Cought upwards of 800 fine fish, 79 Pike, 8 salmon resembling Trout, 1 Rock, 1 flat Back, 127 Buffalow & red horse 4 Bass & 490 Cats, with many Small Silver fish and Srimp I had a Mast made and fixed the Boat today, the wind shifted around to the S. E. every evening a Breeze rises which blows off the Musquitors & cools the atmispeere."

In addition to the journals of Lewis and Clark, other great explorers: Bradbury, Long, Pike, Nuttal, Pattie, to name only a few, left detailed accounts of this fabulous country. Editions of these old journals are in my library and for years I have enjoyed them as windows looking out upon a lost world. It was only natural that in time I should be impelled to set a story against so magnificent a background.

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